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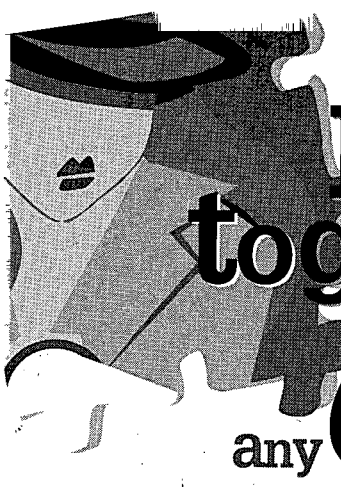

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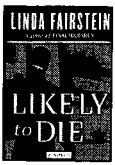

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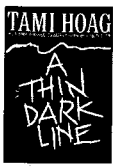

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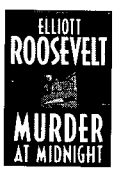

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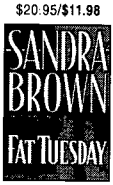

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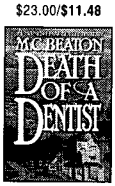

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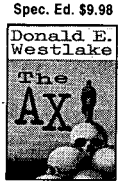

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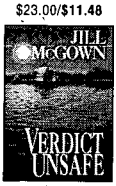

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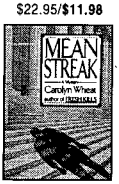

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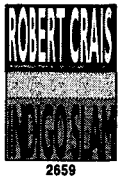

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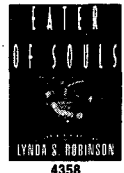

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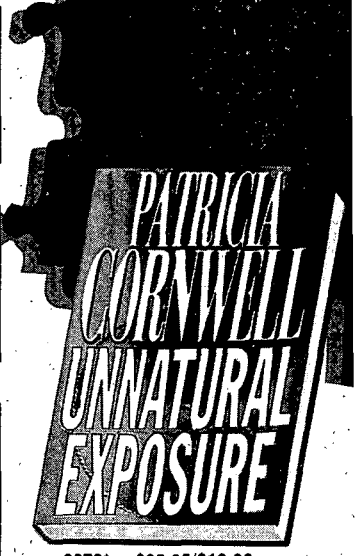

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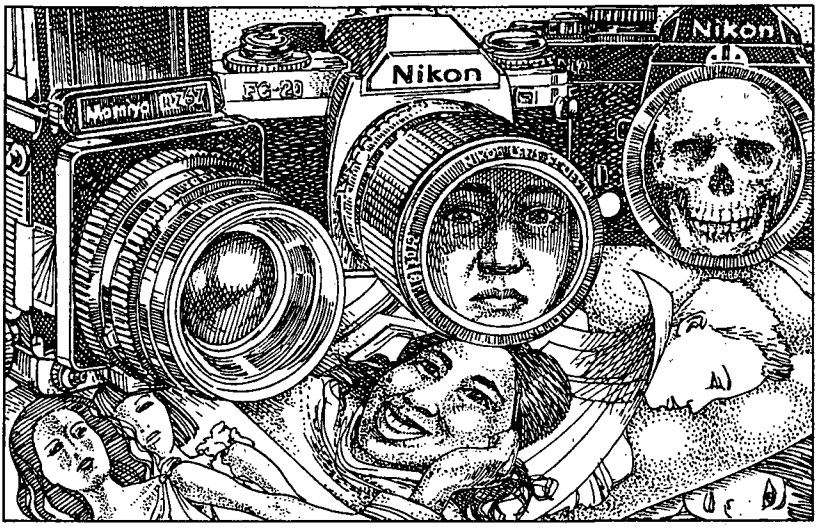

Art by Allen Davis

MODELS

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Skinny sixteen-year-olds, bones for legs, lips pouty, eyes half mast, walked the runway with a big-girl sashay. Hands out for balance, chin jutted forward, they looked like starvation victims posing as high-fashion models.

Payment in food.

She wished.

Corry knelt at the edge of the runway, camera in hand, the constant clickety-click, clickety-click of each shot adding sound effects to the lowering of her own eyelids. Shutting, opening, seeing, not for the first time, those girls that passed as fashionable in America.

They weren't beautiful, they weren't even pretty, most of them. But the camera drew out some part of them, some part the naked eye could never see, an attitude, a posture, a shine—the soul, her mother would say. The essence, the reason Native Americans

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never liked photographs, a little bit stolen and held, forever, in an illusion of light and shadows.

Halfway there, Corry thought. *Halfway there.* But she wasn't sure if she was thinking of the money, stashed in her account, her freedom fund, halfway to the day she could toss her Nikon in her boss's overmade-up face, or if she was thinking of the show itself.

"Come on, Corry. You know we have an afternoon of this." Richard spoke beside her, voice nearly lost in the blaring rock music, behind the clickety-click of the cameras, his and hers.

The name Kristine Rusch is well known to readers of fantasy and science fiction as the author of several best-selling fantasy novels and as the former editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction.* Ms. Rusch has a number of credits in the mystery field, too, including a new novel from St. Martin's Press entitled *Hitler's Angel* (June 1997).

She must have spoken aloud. She smiled at him, feeling distracted, and went back to shooting clothing on models so thin they looked like they belonged in *Save the Children* commercials on late-night TV.

She was leaning against the runway, her favorite spot, not too low, not too high, able to get the girls' faces and the clothes. A moment to change lenses, then focus, focus, focus: shoes, hats, scarves. Accessorize, glamorize, immortalize, all blurring together in a moment frozen in time.

So many years she had done this, now photographing girls half her age, twice her height, two-thirds her weight. She could tune out the blaring rock music, the inane descriptions ("teal with a touch of rose, hinting at the blush in the cheek"), the oohs and aahs of the crowd behind her. Once in a while she was still awe-struck—the sight of Claudette Colbert at a New York fashion benefit a few years before her death—but mostly she gaped in silent shock—Demi Moore's bald G.I. Jane haircut—or didn't look at all. She had long ago stopped worrying about her own looks, dressing in the uniform for fashion photographers: loose shirt, ripped jeans, hair pulled back in a ponytail, three Nikons around her neck, pockets jammed with lenses, too-full photography bag at her feet.

The photographs sold and sold and sold: *New York Times, Vogue,*

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Cosmo; as well as to fashion mags the teeming masses had never heard of, never seen. But somehow the money went—to more equipment, New York rent, the occasional upscale dinner—a treat, at a hundred bucks an entrée, that she could easily live without.

"What's left?" she asked Richard.

His ponytail was coming loose. He was holding a telephoto in one hand, focusing on some skinny child-woman model's shoe. "Three evening." Clickety-click. "I think."

"I'm not doing evening," she said. Hired for daily wear—as if any real woman would wear a pink and green organdy suit to the office. She grabbed her bag, slung it over her shoulder with an "oof!" as the weight dropped against her back, and threaded her way through the applauding matrons (easily three times the weight of the waifs onstage) and slid through the side door behind the runway.

This was the real home of fashion: not the strut-and-wiggle walk, not the preening moment at the edge of the runway, not the turn. Here the models raced, naked, to their next dress, their ribs visible, their hipbones jutting forward, looking like junkies in a 1960s documentary, skin sallow with too much makeup and harsh lights.

The clothing hung on racks staggered throughout the backstage area, the makeup mirrors lined the far wall, the dressing tables beside them, hairdressers and makeup artists applying last-minute touches to girls so cold their nipples were rose pebbles against their taut skin. Models, the height of perfection onstage, were screaming harpies back here, looking for shoes, for earrings, for gloves. It was all hurry, hurry, hurry, and me, me, me, until they mounted the runway, and the glamour dropped over them again.

A hand reached around her, grabbed a camera, held it up. Corry turned. Anita, stage manager, more dignified than the title, hair still in a sixties beehive dyed black, foundation caked in her wrinkles, eyes gray and twinkling. "These aren't allowed back here."

"Got my shots," Corry said. "I'm looking for Kendall."

"Never showed," Anita said. "They had to make do with five stylists. Shoulda heard the bitching."

"Bullshit she never showed," Corry said. "I brought her myself. I was an hour early. Had to go to that dive next door for breakfast just to kill time."

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"Musta chickened out then," Anita said. "Some do on that first break."

Corry frowned. She knew that, but didn't think Kendall capable of it. She'd helped Kendall get the job and Kendall had been grateful. When Corry had shown up that morning, Kendall had been sitting on the stoop of her building, bag in hand, hair meticulously cornrowed and pulled into a top-of-the-head ponytail that cascaded about her face like curls.

Couldn't sleep, she'd said. *You know how many years I waited for this?*

Too many, probably. Corry sighed. She hated it, hated it when she sponsored someone and that person let her down. It'd happened more than she liked to think about: the young photographer whose street scenes caught her, who couldn't shoot a face to save his life; the makeup artists who insisted on orange pancake for stage work; and now Kendall, who had fled without even trying.

"Thanks," she said to Anita.

"Don't thank me," Anita said. "Someone had to give you the bad news."

Actually no one had to, and no one else would have. They would have just saved the information and used it later—*You can't bring her here. The last time you tried that the girl didn't even show.*

She went out the door she came in, back into the crowd, head bent, heading for the main exit, ignoring the cultured female voice droning on about evening's color for fall.

It was black. Fall's night color was always black, and they always announced its arrival as if it were something new.

Pounding woke her up. Close, rhythmic pounding. Door pounding, not New York pounding, not city noise that she could easily tune out as a threat to someone else.

Corry groped for her sleep mask and the lamp simultaneously, sleep-befuddled, eyes pebbly and dry. Light spilled across the room, adding comfort—the Amish quilt she had bought on a Pennsylvania vacation, the photographs of places not people, the narrow eight-by-ten room, with a window that had a view of the neighboring building's brick wall.

The pounding came again, loud, insistent, a will-not-go-away pounding the super would never do. She grabbed her ratty blue bathrobe, slipped her feet into fuzzy slippers, and ran a hand

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through her hair, encountering the sleep mask. She pulled it off and tossed it on the bed.

Her living/dining/kitchen was art deco, and her pride and joy. She hurried through, clicking on one sculpted light although, she noted, the sun was long since up.

Her door had four locks, and she double-checked the chain even before she glanced into the peephole. Two men she'd never seen before, trench-coated against the spring weather, seemingly official.

Not her world.

Then she blinked, the sleep-fog clearing. They'd gotten past the doorman. Only a select few got past the building's security: the people on her list, on her neighbors' lists, and—of course—officials.

She pressed the small intercom beside her door. "What?" she asked in her best nasal New York don't-mess-with-me accent.

"Police," one of the men said. She couldn't tell which one. Her vantage from the peephole only allowed her to see bits and pieces, not the whole picture. The shorter man, the one with hair, held up a badge. It looked official too.

She undid three locks and pulled the door open, still relying on the chain.

"What?" she asked again.

"Police," the taller one said.

"I got that," she said. "Forgive me if I'm a bit cautious here"—that said with sarcasm—"but I don't know a real badge from a Hollywood knockoff and you're not in uniform."

"Detectives Pallant and Scorpino, here about Kendall Dee."

Corry's heart did a double flip-flop, and she undid the chain. "Sorry I didn't dress," she said. "Late night."

They came in, big and bulky in her small space. She pushed the door closed, refastened the locks from sheer habit.

"Coffee?" she asked.

They shook their heads. She went into the kitchen anyway, needing something to hold. Shoulda trusted her instincts, shouldn'ta felt betrayed, shoulda looked for Kendall.

You know how many years I waited for this?

Corry used the microwave to make instant, brought the steaming mug back into the living area. The detectives were still standing, studying her stuff from their position in the middle of the floor.

"You can sit, you know," she said.

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They moved toward her seating arrangement as if they were waiting for the invitation. The short one perched on the edge of her delicate black and white painted wood chair. The tall one sat in the middle of her fainting couch.

She leaned on the polished black and silver bar that separated the kitchen space from the rest of the room. She was unwilling to sit with them, to treat them as regular visitors.

"What happened to Kendall?" she asked, unable to wait until they told her, knowing that the feeling inside her gut would last for a long, long time. Shoulda checked, shoulda known, shoulda trusted her instincts.

"Found her in an alley just off Fashion Avenue," the short one said.

"At the limousine exit," the tall one said, seemingly without sarcasm.

Corry's throat tightened. "Who found her?"

The short one flipped through a small notebook, even though, she sensed, he didn't need to. "A Mrs. Hayward Langley."

Corry closed her eyes. She remembered Mrs. Hayward Langley, a bottle blonde with breasts the size of the Queen Mary and a waist the size of copper piping. She looked like a Wife Number Two who was determined to outlast the rich s.o.b. she'd married. She dressed well, but always lamented, usually from behind Corry, that the clothes designers made these days weren't made for a "real woman's figure."

Or a real woman's budget.

Corry sighed. Opened her eyes. Found the men looking at her. "She was dead, right? You never said whether she had died or not."

"Crumpled like yesterday's laundry and left on the stoop for the first limo lady to step on as she fled with her goods," the tall one said.

The short one shot him a withering look. "She'd been beaten to death," he said gently.

The instant tasted like bile. She made herself swallow. She couldn't think about this, not now. She had cops in her home. Detectives. They had an agenda. She would think about Kendall later.

Kendall.

"Which one of you is Pallant and which is Scorpino?" Corry asked.

"I'm Scorpino," the short one said, and with his thick crop of dark hair, his button-brown eyes, his Roman nose, she wondered

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how she missed it. He was watching her cautiously, as if he didn't quite know why she had asked.

"We understand you might have been the last one to see her alive," Pallant said. His eyes were so gray they were nearly clear.

"I dropped her off," Corry said. "She was supposed to work the show."

"But she never made it," Pallant said. He was determined to be bad cop. She wondered at their presence, at their intentions.

"She never made it," Corry agreed.

"And you just left?"

Corry shrugged. She set her mug on the bar, no longer interested in the coffee.

You know how many years I waited for this?

She couldn't think about it. Not now. "A lot of them, they just chicken out," she said. "High stakes, big world, they take one look and run."

"You thought Kendall did that," Scorpino said.

"I was surprised. She didn't seem the type. But then, they never do." She licked her lips, wanted to ask if she was a suspect, and decided not to: It might sound suspicious.

"You go in with her when you dropped her off?" Pallant asked.

She shook her head, then related all she could remember from the morning just to stop them from asking questions. Scorpino took notes. Pallant corrected, clarified, quizzed while Corry's stomach growled and her eyes burned. She had to concentrate to keep Kendall's voice from her head, Kendall's wide smile and obvious excitement.

Oh, Corry, what if they like me? What if they want me to come back?

"We understand you had a camera backstage." Scorpino flipped his notebook closed and shoved it in the pocket of his overcoat. He seemed too young for the job, a square-jawed twenty-five-year-old out of central casting.

"Pictures backstage aren't allowed," she said.

"Doesn't stop most people," Pallant said.

"It does if they want to keep working," she snapped, then took a breath. She hadn't meant to use that tone. But she hadn't eaten, and a girl she had sponsored was dead, and she needed time to think about it.

"We'd like to see the photos you took yesterday anyway," Scorpino said. In spite of herself, she liked him better, just like she was supposed to.

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"All right," she said, and led them to the tiny bathroom she used as a darkroom. They could have the photographs, any photographs they wanted, but not the negatives. They wanted negatives, she would hire an attorney. That simple.

The bathroom was off the bedroom, just behind the kitchen. She led them past her rumpled sheets, the evidence of the chaos they had created by arriving so early in her day. The bathroom itself was small, barely wide enough for her, without a window. She had a board over the tub for her chemicals, a clothesline woven across the ceiling, and around the makeshift shower curtain rod. The short, stained commode was covered with a blanket because it had no lid, and she was always afraid she would knock a finished photograph into it in the dark.

She flicked on the light. Rows and rows of photos stared back at them: the good shots—sassy skinny models; black-and-white clothes; color clothes; shoes; and the runway, looking like every other runway, the show looking like every other show. The men stood in the door, short, tall, like something out of a Marx Brothers' film, staring at the photographs staring back at them.

"Mind?" Scorpino asked as he went to the nearest photograph, the latest Kate Moss clone dressed in lace and ribbons.

Corry shrugged. She minded, but they were cops. She had already drawn her mental line. They had only to cross it.

He pulled the photograph down, then the next and the next. The ceiling line shook and the remaining photographs danced, one after another, like a conga line. A photograph caught her eye, and she barely suppressed a gasp: She had forgotten it was there, how she had started the black-and-white roll she had finished yesterday afternoon.

Kendall, smiling, her teeth stark white, her skin a muted gray against the darker gray of the brownstone behind her. Laughing, her hair spilling around her like a poem.

Pallant followed Corry's gaze. "That Kendall Dee?"

"Yes," she said, unable to take her gaze off the photograph, off Kendall's eyes, twinkling with joy.

"Is that the only one?"

"Yes," she said.

Scorpino took it.

"All these from yesterday?" Pallant asked.

"Yes," she said and watched as they stripped her bathroom bare.

"You have more?" Pallant asked.

"No," she said, staring at the empty room, the dancing clothes

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line, the board on top of her bathtub, her blanket-covered commode. Kendall was dead and Corry had a deadline that she didn't dare miss, a deadline she'd have to work the entire day toward because the cops had her photos.

Scorpino held her photographs with his left hand. With his right, he handed her a business card. "Thanks for your cooperation, Ms. Lindstrom. We'll be in touch."

Sure, she thought. *Sure.* And listened as the two men let themselves out.

She spent the day in a frenzy of work, standing in the red light of the darkroom, her skin a burnished bronze, her gloved fingers awash in chemicals. The strips of film told stories she hadn't bothered to listen to before. She stared at the images she had rejected, the models' grimaces, the blurred cloth, and developed them as well. And the roll of Kendall, the one she had forgotten because none of the photos were what she wanted. None, except the one the police took with them.

Kendall smiling, Kendall frowning, Kendall laughing at something behind her, Kendall threatening a strand of her boyfriend's hair with scissors, Kendall nervous in repose as she thought about the day ahead.

The day she died.

Corry didn't stop moving, didn't leave the room even as it grew stuffy and hot, didn't stop staring at image after image, at her attempts to hold onto pieces of life, to keep them against her heart, and guard them against the violence all around her.

Kendall, beaten to death and left in the alley for some rich woman to find.

Kendall, on the day of her dreams.

Early the next morning, Corry dropped her portfolio at *Vogue* with a note offering to help with layout, as she always did. They never took her up on the offer, but the editors had told her that the offer pleased them, made them feel as if they had a backup in case they all disagreed on the best way to present the shots.

She said nothing about Kendall and neither did they. No one else seemed to know.

Then she went to Kendall's brownstone with the remaining photographs, the shots of Kendall. She planned to leave them on the stoop as a sort of offering to the dead.

But when she arrived, she found two men on the stoop.

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Kendall's boyfriend, Jas, was big—the kind of man who spent half his life at the gym. He had ripped the sleeves out of his T-shirt, revealing arms the size of a side of beef. He had gold eyebrow rings, and a tattoo on his left cheek. The man beside him was smaller, less flamboyant—no tattoos, no piercings, no overdeveloped muscles—and unfamiliar.

Until Corry stopped in front of him.

Then he looked at her, with Kendall's face, Kendall's frown, Kendall's wide, dark eyes.

"You must be her brother," Corry said, trying for ingenuous, but instead sounding lame. "I'm sorry."

"You're sorry?" Jas pushed up, towered over her. His lower lip was trembling, his skin blotchy and swollen. "You? She'd still be here if you hadn'ta filled her head with stupid dreams."

"I know," Corry said, but Jas didn't wait for her reply. He teared up, turned, and sprinted up the stairs, letting himself inside.

Kendall's brother watched him go, then shrugged, as if following his sister's distraught boyfriend wasn't worth his time. His dress was too elegant for the neighborhood: his pants expensive and well creased, his shoes black and shiny, his shirt a fine soft cotton. His hair was tailored too, long and tapered, without Kendall's kink.

"You must be the photographer," he said, as if Jas hadn't been there at all, as if his emotional outburst had happened somewhere else.

"Corry," she said, handing him the file of photographs.

He took them, but didn't look. "Romer," he said.

His hands were long and slender. They rested on top of the Manila as if posing. She wished she had her camera; then she could look without embarrassment.

"I'm sorry," she said again.

"Me too," he said. "It was a wasteful, tragic way to die."

His voice was resonant, deep, and yet his inflections were Kendall's. The slight rise on the last syllable of the sentence, the slow phrasing, the soft tone.

The hair rose on the back of her neck.

"Those are for you," she said, nodding at the file. "Of her."

"Thank you," he said.

She took the dismissal where there was none, nodded her goodbye, and started down the street.

"Corry." He called after her. "The funeral is tomorrow. Noon."

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She stopped, closed her eyes against the knowledge, then sighed. It wasn't over yet. She had penance, and it had barely begun.

She slipped in late. The church was full of faces she didn't recognize. She wasn't even sure she would recognize her own: She wore her hair down like Kendall always wanted her to. The dress was black and old; it was loose around her breasts and hips. She had lost weight, not surprising, considering all those starvation victims she photographed. Somewhere, somehow that idea of beauty must have seeped into her own subconscious.

She couldn't remember the last time she ate. Maybe it was that, instead, a lack of care instead of too much care. A lack of care. That's how she came to be in this church in the first place. A lack of care, a willingness to believe in Anita's dismissal of Kendall, a willingness to trust someone else's instincts instead of her own.

How many of the others who had run away, who had vanished from their first days, their first jobs, had done so because of her lack of care? She had thought it enough to bring them. But maybe she should have soothed their fears, eased their transition into a world of bitchy, cranky, overpaid waifs and money-grubbing, ball-busting managers.

Maybe she had failed in that too.

She eased into a pew near the center, wishing for an Audrey Hepburn *Breakfast-at-Tiffany's* hat. A wide brim, a veil, worn with gloves and pumps, discreet enough to be mysterious, but tasteful enough not to be distracting.

She felt as if everyone were looking at her. The woman who had sent Kendall to her death.

Behind the pulpit, a minister droned on about death and redemption, about life everlasting, about things that had nothing to do with Kendall, things she had never professed. Jas sat in the second row, his head bowed, his great muscles straining the seams of his suit. An elderly woman sat in the front row, hunched, a handkerchief clutched in her arthritic fist. Romer sat beside her, his hand on her shoulder, comforting. He stared at the minister as if he were intent on each word, but his lower lip trembled. He finally bit it to stop the movement.

Corry couldn't look at him anymore. Nor could she look at the couple beside her, clutching the hymnals as if they held the secret to survival. Her gaze passed over the pasty-faced minister, a man, she wagered, who had never known Kendall. What kind of world was it where strangers presided over a family's grief?

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And finally, finally her gaze brushed the coffin, closed, its polished wood gleaming in the artificial light. A spray of daffodils, lilies, and white roses dominated one corner. A photograph—her photograph—of Kendall laughing stood in front.

Kendall laughing.

"Oh God," Corry murmured and looked away. She grabbed her own hymnal, clutched it tightly, staring at it, the words embossed in gold against the fake black leather. How long since she had last been in church? How long since she had focused on anything except her photographs? Except the clickety-click of the shutter, the blare of rock music, the too-slender legs of the girl-woman models in front of her? How long?

A lifetime.

Kendall's lifetime.

At last it was over. She had planned to weave her way through the small crowd, to escape the cloying moments of murmured grief, and to disappear down the street. But as she stepped through the double doors, as her heels hit the concrete landing above the dozen stairs leading to the sidewalk, a hand slipped under her elbow.

"Don't leave yet."

The voice was soft, cultured, warm. Male. Romer stood beside her, his fingers lightly caressing her skin. He seemed as calm as he had the day before, as if nothing could touch him, as if nothing ever would.

"I don't belong here," she said.

"Neither do I," he said, and with his grip light on her elbow, started down the stairs. She had seen this before, at every major show: the designer leading his most famous model, wearing the prize of his season's collection, before a crowd.

"But your mother—" Corry said.

"My grandmother," he said. "She's fine. Jas is taking her to the apartment. She'll have company all day."

"Won't they expect you there?"

"Maybe. Later." They reached the sidewalk, and he led her away from the subway station, toward the intersection. "They were surprised I even showed."

So, come to think of it, was she. Kendall had never mentioned her brother, except in passing, the way people did when they discussed something that wasn't important. *When we were kids, my brother and I . . .*

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But never something current. Never something now.

He rounded a corner and hailed a cab. As they got in, he said, "Where to?"

She wasn't sure she wanted him to know where she lived. She smiled, shrugged. "Your cab," she said.

He leaned forward, gave the driver a location on the Upper West Side. A five-minute, silent drive, and they disembarked in an area as foreign to Kendall as Fashion Avenue had been. He led Corry into an exclusive bistro, took her hand, and pulled her toward the back, up a flight of stairs, and onto a balcony that the restaurant had converted into a garden terrace overlooking an alley, trying but somehow failing to appear as if they were not in New York.

They took a table in a corner, away from the other patrons. An orchid graced the table, and flowering plants she didn't recognize crept along the wall beside them. The air smelled of flowers and exhaust, of coffee and humanity. This was her world, but she hadn't expected it of Kendall, or at least, of Kendall's brother.

He ordered espresso for both of them, along with a sinfully rich dessert she would never have ordered for herself. He did so in a way that showed he was accustomed to posh restaurants, and service, and people accompanying him who didn't disagree with him. Corry went along as well, partly because she hadn't expected to spend her afternoon here, partly because she wanted to see where this would lead.

He waited until the waitress left before threading his fingers together and resting his hands on the table. "The police," he said, his warm voice surrounding her like a soft blanket, "think Jas did it. He was jealous of her opportunity, didn't want to lose her, tried to stop her, and beat her to death."

She wasn't going to give Romer anything. He would have to work for it, all of it, even the things she didn't know. "What do you think?"

"I think Fashion Avenue is a long way from home. I think if he was going to kill her in a fit of jealous rage, he would have done it before she left, not after she arrived."

Romer's logic appealed to her, but she saw the police's logic too in Jas's large arms, his powerful hands. But she had never seen Jas lose his temper, and Kendall had once told her that Jas was the most gentle man she had known.

"Why don't they arrest him, then?"

"It's a theory. They have no evidence, and they've moved on to other things."

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They had her photographs. That was evidence, of a type. "Are you so sure they've moved on?" she asked.

"They weren't at the funeral," he said, and in his voice, his calm voice, she heard a wisp of something so faint she might have imagined it.

"They only do that in the movies," she said.

The waitress brought their espresso and the shared dessert. It was made of cream cheese and berries, layered with whipped cream, all piled on a flaky piecrust. She had never tasted anything so delicious.

He took a bite, turned his fork, eased it out of his mouth slowly. His mouth was his own, not Kendall's, thin lips dusky against his dark skin. "Jas says you were Kendall's best friend."

Corry was so startled, she choked. She took a sip of espresso, let the bitterness mix with the sweetness of her dessert, and thought before answering. "I guess we were close. For New York."

But not anywhere else. Anywhere else, they would have spent time in each other's apartments, they would have gone to lunch, they would have talked on the phone. Here they had coffee and talked about dreams, and never dropped in on each other. She had only met Jas three times, never knew about Kendall's family, and Kendall didn't know about hers.

If she had known about Kendall's family, she wouldn't have been surprised at the ease with which Romer entered the restaurant. She would have known that opportunity wouldn't frighten Kendall. She would have given her friend the benefit of the doubt.

And maybe saved her life.

"I was wondering," he said, "if maybe you knew, if maybe you had any idea what happened, something maybe the police wouldn't think to ask, something about that place, or about her . . . ?"

His voice trailed off, and the warmth had vanished, replaced by a quavering just beneath the words. She saw then how much his calm was a mask, how the warmth was an artifice, put on for the public to hide the depths of his despair.

"No," she said. "I'm sorry. I don't know. I've been thinking about it for days, and I don't. Really."

He nodded once, looked at the flowers, and leaned his chair back. He took a deep breath, and when he looked at her, the mask was back, the warmth, the calm, the ease that he carried around him like a shield.

"It's all right," he said, and she knew he lied.

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Clickety-click. The weight of cameras around her neck. Clickety-click. The smells of perfume and fear. Models sweat like everyone else. She leaned closer, resting one elbow on the runway, shooting back and up to get the length, the motion, the swirl of the fabric. Music blared around her, and behind her women cooed as a particular design appeared, bold and startling and new.

Charity event, this one. The models not quite first class, although Naomi Campbell would grace the room with her presence at the end. The point was the clothing, the chance to say *I had seen her before she was famous, before* Vogue *discovered her, before she became the Estee Lauder girl.* An afternoon event in the near off-season, timed with a special performance of last year's Broadway success, an event designed for tourists who wanted to pretend they were rich, pretend they were somebody, pretend they were in the know.

Corry was covering this as a favor for one of her editors—everyone was doing everyone else a favor and at the same time, acknowledging that they should be somewhere else. Shot after shot after shot. Oh, she despised the waifs, and oh, how they played to her, hoping she would give them the one photo, the one career-making break that would lead them to the big time.

Other photographers beside her, Richard down the way, her mainstay, her anchor. He spoke of the days when he would be able to go out West, the real West, not the Midwest, and do nature photography, and live in the wild.

He could no more survive in the wild than these girls could survive a four-day fast. But she cherished him. His dreams were more focused than hers. When she leaned against the runway, seeing yet another generation of models climbing over each other for glory, she could only think of her freedom fund. Her life, her future existed in a nebulous way, in an anywhere-but-here manner.

The music turned glitzy. She bent, picked up her fourth camera, the heaviest, the most expensive, filled with color film. They had hit the main event, the one she would make her money on. Naomi Campbell in her one outfit of the day, the one that would appear in *People* and *Entertainment Weekly* and maybe, if she was lucky, the *Times* Sunday fashion supplement. Corry backed into the crowd, avoided the tables of women dripping diamonds, and clicked shot after shot after shot, not really seeing Campbell, but feeling her, feeling the dress, feeling the intimacy of the moment, and its distance, wondering what it was like to be a body and a name and a face and nothing else. Pressed and preened and

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pawed, dressed and made-up by others as if she were a living, breathing doll.

A third-generation model, a superstar whose body had been stylish ten years before, before the anorexic look had been imported from England, before the designers tried to make an anti-fashion statement which became a statement in and of itself.

And then it was over—or her part at least. The matrons at the tables still had to sit through a charity auction before their special staging of selected moments from *Rent*. Corry would escape before she saw Jonathan Larson's play ignored by the very people it was trying to teach.

She threaded her way back to the runway, grabbed her camera bag, and put her equipment away. She headed toward the side door when she saw him out of the corner of her eye.

Arms crossed, hair stylish, fingers manicured, gaze on her, he looked like he belonged here, and she did not. No longer did she see the resemblance to Kendall. Now she saw the whole package, and realized she knew little of Romer besides his relationship to a woman who had considered Corry a close friend.

"This is how you make your living?" he asked as she passed him.

"Does that seem so strange to you?" she asked.

"Actually, it does."

"And this," she said, shaking the sleeve of his silk suit, "makes me wonder how you make yours."

"For a woman who specializes in faces, you're not very good at your job," he said.

She frowned, wondering at that. No one had stopped him on the street when she had been with him, but this was *New York*. Only tourists gawked at celebrities here. Everyone else pretended it was an everyday occurrence.

And then, because she couldn't place him as anything but Kendall's brother, she snapped, "I don't specialize in faces. I specialize in images."

He turned from her, his gaze on the stage. "I guess there's a difference, isn't there?"

It felt like a rebuke, like she was sliding in quicksand when she had thought she had her feet firmly in place. She let go of his sleeve, turned, and headed out, threading her way through intent matrons clutching their purses as if they couldn't reconcile the clothing with the money. She let herself out the side door and stopped when she realized she was in an alley.

It smelled of piss and garbage. On the street beyond, cars

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whooshed by, horns honked, pedestrians moved in large clumps, oblivious to her and the alley beyond. Kendall had died in a place like this, twenty-five feet from help, five feet from her dreams.

Corry clutched her camera bag, held her head up, and made her way toward the street. *Avoiding a mugging,* her self-defense instructor had once said, *is fifty percent knowledge and fifty percent attitude. Walk like you're afraid, and you become a victim. Walk like you own the world, and no one will mess with you.*

She didn't own the world. She knew it. Kendall was dead, she didn't recognize Romer, and a fear she had forgotten crept into the dark places.

Romer. Somehow she had expected him to follow her. Instead, he had stayed inside where no one had questioned his presence, no one approached him, no one thought him out of the ordinary. His silk suit and air of money carried him a long way.

He had money and Kendall did not.

He avoided the family and Kendall did not.

They had history that might be important.

Or maybe not.

Maybe Kendall had stepped outside for a moment, the wrong moment, and met with the wrong person.

Maybe she had known her assailant.

Maybe not.

Corry reached the end of the alley and stepped into the throng, feeling relief flood through her. In the decade she'd been in the city, she'd become a true New Yorker: safety in numbers, fear in the quiet spaces alone.

Kendall's death had rekindled Corry's awareness of the city's dangers.

Kendall's death and Romer's arrival. Somehow the two were becoming inextricably mixed in Corry's mind.

The precinct was grimy. It smelled of day-old coffee and dirty shoes. The ancient fluorescent lights washed out everything, the metal desks, the green 1940s office chairs, the black phones and early-eighties computer systems obviously bought at a bargain. Beneath the grime was an old building with a lot of architectural interest: marble stairs, oak trim, floor-to-ceiling windows in the reception area—floor-to-ceiling windows now covered with bars to prevent break-in, or perhaps, breakout.

Corry had had the presence of mind to make an appointment with Detective Scorpino, but she still had to wait nearly an hour on

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a wooden bench with iron scrollwork. A bit too ornate for her apartment, but the period was right. Beside her sat a man with a stained T-shirt and ripped jeans who'd had garlic for lunch, an overweight woman with hair dyed so black it absorbed light, and a teenage girl clutching a fistful of hundreds and trying to hold back tears.

A female police officer came for the girl, who trembled in fright as she disappeared into the bowels of the precinct. The heavyset woman did not move over, and Corry remained pressed against the scrollwork, trying to hold her breath every time the man beside her exhaled.

Finally Scorpino materialized before her. He wore an off-the-rack shirt, sleeves rolled up, and pants that needed taking in. His hair was ruffled, and he had large circles under his eyes.

"Ms. Lindstrom," he said. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

She nodded, unwilling to say it was all right, and stood. He led her past the rows of open desks to a small cubicle, like the ones she had seen in magazine offices. Instead of family photos tacked against the fabric walls, she saw photos of murder victims, hideously waxlike in death. Her photo of Kendall smiling was in the middle of the morgue.

He gave her the only chair and leaned against the plastic computer desk covered with files. "If you're here about the photographs," he said, "I can't return them to you. We need them as evidence."

She sat, her purse on her lap, feeling like the matrons at the charity event. "You've got something then."

His smile was sad, his head-shake minuscule. "We have our suspicions, but no leads. You?"

She blinked at him, startled that he would think she knew anything at all. "No," she said. "I really did come about the photos. I'm uncomfortable thinking that they'll get lost here."

He shrugged, pushed a file aside. "Lots of things get lost here."

"Kendall will, won't she?"

He sighed and ran a hand through his already ruffled hair. No time for the expensive cut that Romer had, no manicured fingers or silk suits. This was a man whose life was pulled in a thousand directions, filled with death and no closure at all.

"I've already got twenty new cases," he said, "all of them as pressing, all of them as baffling. I may close two of them if I'm lucky. Two, Ms. Lindstrom. If I'm lucky. But I'll keep her photograph up there. To remind me. I'll do what I can."

She believed him. And somehow that made his words even less

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reassuring than they had been before. "Have you talked to her brother?" she asked, getting to her other reason behind the trip, the hour-long wait, the rising fear.

"The lawyer with the weird name? I talked to him once. I don't plan to again."

She frowned. Lawyer. Why would she recognize a lawyer? "So you think he's all right?"

"You mean do I think he did it? No. His alibi is solid. He was on the Left Coast in meetings and being important until his grandmother called him with the news. Why? You know something I don't?"

"Only that he doesn't fit," Corry said. "Not with Kendall."

"Can't prosecute a man for being different," Scorpino said. Then he smiled, the first real smile she'd ever seen from him. "Though Lord knows there's folks around here who try."

She smiled, stood, and held out her hand. "Thanks," she said.

"For nothing." He took her hand, his palm warm against hers. She let the touch linger a moment, then pulled away. "I'll call you if I hear anything," he said.

And she thanked him again, even though she knew he was merely being polite.

Ten years in the city. Ten years, and she'd never lost anyone, not like this, not so violently, so senselessly. What had Romer said? *Wasteful. Tragic.* As if there were good ways to die. There probably were: at age 100, asleep in a comfortable bed. Saving someone's child from drowning, or pulling people from a burning house. Those were acceptable ways to die.

Not being beat up in an alley. Not being left like a pile of garbage on society's back stair.

Corry had finished developing her last shoot, and had delivered the photos. She had three days before a shoot for *Glamour,* specially arranged in conjunction with Yankee Stadium. Six supermodels and the Yankees for a spread of transitional clothes to tie in with the pennant race.

As if anyone really believed the Yankees had a shot this year.

She had nothing to do, except brood.

She sat on the fainting couch in her apartment, window shade up, lights off, staring at the city beyond. It had given her more money than her parents had ever made, given her more contacts than she ever wanted to exploit, and a job she would have described as a dream job when she was eighteen and hungry.

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It had also allowed her to buy this tiny apartment at a price that would have let her buy a home anywhere else. It had mugged her three times until she spent six weeks in a self-defense class. It had taught her to look at strangers as dangerous, things to be avoided, not people who might become friends.

It had taken Kendall, for reasons Corry did not understand.

And that was what bothered her.

She stood. No one had cause to kill Kendall. Jas loved her, and Kendall had been right. Jas was a gentle man. No one at the show had known Kendall, and yet the killer had left her there, on the steps, as if thumbing his nose at the entire fashion world.

But why Kendall, who hadn't even received her first paycheck? Why not Anita or one of the makeup artists? Or the myriad of assistants, schlepping clothes, carrying boxes, lifting lights?

She froze then.

Kendall had been left at the limo exit. The limo exit, for models and superstars and people who didn't want to be hassled, didn't want to be seen.

Not where Corry had left her. Corry had left her at the backstage door, the place she and Richard laughingly called the servant's entrance because no one with a salary in the six figures would knowingly walk through it.

Anita had lied.

Kendall had been inside.

Corry called him.

She called him because she couldn't be alone with this, because the knowledge terrified her more than ignorance had. And when he answered, his smooth-as-butter voice almost made her hang up.

Instead she said, "What kind of lawyer are you?"

"Corry?" he asked, the practiced ease disappearing with his surprise.

"What kind of lawyer?" she asked again, suddenly realizing it was important for her to know.

"Entertainment," he said.

And then she recognized him. Romer Dee, lawyer to the stars, the man everyone turned to when the contract sucked, when the agents failed, when the deal became a bust. She had seen his photo in the trades more times than she cared to think, and she had never once placed his face, his name, with Kendall.

His answer confused her, threw her off balance. If he were that Romer Dee, then why was his sister scrambling for a wage,

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thrilled at a hairdressing connection with Corry when her brother could provide her with an even better job?

"Corry?" he said.

She stared at the receiver, wondering now if she should tell him, what she should tell him.

"Corry?" he said again.

"I think you had better come over here," she said, and hung up.

It took him thirty minutes to arrive. Thirty minutes, in which she turned on every light in the apartment, straightened the newspapers off the fainting couch, remade her darkroom into a bathroom, warned the doorman, and checked the phone nearly a dozen times. It wasn't until after she had hung up that she realized she hadn't given him her address. Jas knew it, of course, because Kendall had, but that didn't mean Romer did.

But he had connections, he found things out. When he arrived, he did so with determination. The doorman phoned her to let her know that Romer was coming up. She hovered near the door, looked through the spyhole after his knock, and wondered how a man in dress-down casuals still managed to look so expensive. She undid the locks and let him in, suddenly wishing she had paid more attention to her own appearance, and then mentally kicking herself for doing so.

He paused when he got inside, as if the art deco surprised him. She closed the door behind him, locked it, and watched him absorb her room.

Finally he turned to face her and there was a guarded look in his eyes. "You sounded odd on the phone," he said.

She nodded. "I didn't know what you did." She ran a hand through her hair, went to the kitchen, opened the fridge. "Get you anything?"

"A beer?" he asked.

She pulled out a Samuel Adams, which was all she had, and some bottled water for herself. "Kendall was a good hairstylist."

"Was she?" he said. "I didn't know."

"One of the best. Working for the minimum at a walk-in hair place in the Village." She pulled the top off his beer and slid the bottle to him.

"Then you did well, getting her that opportunity."

"You could have gotten her the same opportunity." She opened her water, sipped it, and turned. He was sitting at her counter,

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head down, sliding the bottle back and forth, the condensation beading on the black and silver surface.

"I wanted her to come to L.A. with me when she was thirteen," he said. "You've photographed her. You know. She had that essence the camera looks for, the one not available in every perfect face. Something about her came alive through a lens."

Corry knew. She hadn't realized how strong the quality was until the morning after Kendall died, when she saw Kendall's smiling face hanging from the line in her bathroom.

"She came out when she was eighteen and worked steady for almost a year. Some modeling, half a dozen commercials, some guest spots. I was managing her, and she had it. She had it all." He stopped sliding the beer, clutched it in his well-manicured hands. "But she hated it. And me. So superficial, she said. So unreal. She hated being out front, hated the games and the parties and the fake friendships. She took the money she earned and came back here. I thought she left me, I thought she was going to model here, but she didn't. She sent me her address, I never wrote back, and we kept track of each other through our grandmother."

He ran his fingers along the bottle, never meeting Corry's eyes.

"I thought she had come back because of me, because she didn't like what I'd become. It wasn't until she was dead that my grandmother said Kendall had come back because she hated being just a face. She lived off the money she made, went to three different schools, and finally discovered hairstyling."

"It suited her," Corry said.

He nodded. "It was a way of being in the business without being the focus of the business."

"Like you."

He blinked, startled, then smiled sadly. "Oh, I'm a focus now."

She took another sip from the water. It was cool and soothing on the back of her throat. "You were at the charity event because you were looking for familiar faces, because you thought someone came after her because of you."

He shrugged. "It was a long shot."

"Very long," she said. "If I had beat someone to death, I wouldn't return to anything resembling the scene of the crime. I'd get out of Dodge, get an alibi, find the perfect excuse."

"Yeah," he said, and sighed.

She got up, grabbed the box of photos she had printed the day after Kendall died, and placed it on the counter. "I would do that,

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and hope. Hope no one at such a highly publicized event caught me on film."

He found nothing. He went through photograph after photograph, stack after stack, looking for people who hated him, people who had disliked her, people who had a grudge, for one reason or another. He found lots of people he recognized, lots of familiar faces, but no one with the power to kill with fists, no one who had that much hatred and that much rage.

He left more discouraged than when he had arrived. And as Corry let him out the door, she wondered at her own unwillingness to tell him about Anita, about the realization that Kendall had actually gone inside, the realization that had made Corry call him in the first place.

She grabbed the box and went to the counter, meaning to put the photographs away. She picked one up, held it, frowned. She had never really looked at her own work before. Oh, she'd seen its composition and its style, its depth and the image it tried to communicate, all things she could judge in a heartbeat, things so ingrained that if the photo wasn't what she wanted, she wouldn't look at it, she would discard it without a single thought.

But now she looked, actually looked at the bone-thin legs done black and white, wearing platform shoes so clunky that the legs looked as if they couldn't take the strain. Through the legs, parted in a walk, she saw faces, a dozen faces, most upturned and watching with a fake look of slight interest, a handful turned away in conversation. All black and white, all noir, all giving the sense of a moment long past, not merely a week ago.

She looked at each photo, stunned at the breadth of the images she did capture, images she would never be paid for: two women laughing as one pointed at a particularly ugly dress; another woman clutching her gloves against her chest like an extra pair of hands; a designer squinting at someone else's work with complete fury.

And at the back of a photo, almost in shadow, Anita, half in profile, talking with a man Corry faintly recognized.

Anita, who should have been backstage.

Corry focused her attention on the man. He had the look of Romer, that elegant expensive look, but his hair was too long and his skin too white. She set the photo aside, grabbed the next, hands shaking.

They were in the back again, out of focus and almost out of

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range. Anita was blurred, her hand moving toward her face, but the man was turning. He looked even more familiar than he had before, but she couldn't place him, her own words to Romer rising in her memory:

I don't specialize in faces. I specialize in images.

She picked up the third photo. Anita's hand was at her face, but the man was already turning away, as if he had seen Corry's camera and didn't want it catching him.

She looked at the next photo, and the next, and the next, but the man was gone. Not gone, perhaps, but her camera no longer found him, her eye having drifted to something it considered more important, something that caught her fancy a few hours after her friend had lost her life.

Anita was protecting someone. Someone she knew.

If I had beat someone to death, I wouldn't return to anything resembling the scene of the crime. I'd get out of Dodge, get an alibi, find the perfect excuse, Corry had said.

Unless.

Unless she belonged at the scene, unless her absence would be missed. But only a few people would truly be missed. The models, the designers, the announcers. Everyone else could disappear, be substituted, and no one would notice, no one would care.

The models.

The designers.

The announcers.

None of whom knew Kendall.

All of whom would think the limousine exit was the only place out of the building, the only protected place, the one which guaranteed no one would be seen.

No one or no body.

This time, she called Scorpino. He was still in his office, and asked her to meet him. She brought the photographs.

The precinct looked no different at night. The coffee smell permeated, as if the ancient grounds had taken over the entire building. Different faces, different uniforms, but the same number of people. It gave her a false illusion of safety, as if New York's finest were really manned enough to take care of every criminal in the city.

Scorpino looked even more tired than the last time she saw him. His tie was loose around his neck and covered with a large mustard stain. His sleeves, rolled up, had carved grooves into the skin of his arms.

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"Let's see them," he said, hand extended, palm out.

She gave him the photos, the edges curled because she hadn't dried them properly. He looked through them rapidly, one, two, three, like she would have, evaluating, judging, discarding.

"What am I supposed to see?" he asked, and she gave him mental points for not dismissing her out of hand.

She walked around him, stopped beside, and pointed to Anita. "She's the stage manager. She never comes out front."

"And the man?"

"I'm not sure. He looks familiar."

"I don't understand the relevance, Ms. Lindstrom. These photos were taken hours after the event."

"Anita lied to me about Kendall. I dropped Kendall at the back entrance. She was found at the limousine exit. Most people don't even know those two doors are part of the same building. She had to have been inside. And Anita said she never showed."

Scorpino never took his gaze from the photos. "It sure looks like this guy doesn't want to be seen." Then he set the photos down. "We've already spoken to your friend Anita once. She volunteered nothing. We'll try again, but please understand, Ms. Lindstrom, that this is a thin lead. It will probably come to nothing."

"I know," she said. "I know."

In the middle of the night she woke up, one of her own photographs clear in her mind.

The designer, watching the fall fashions, squinting at another designer's work in complete fury.

The photograph was important, important somehow.

She took off her sleep mask, turned on the light, and grabbed her robe. Then she went into the main room, turned on the kitchen light, and pawed through the box of photographs until she found it.

The designer was not the same man Anita had been talking to, but something in his expression was important. Not just the fury; that was obvious. Anyone who beat a person to death had to be filled with fury. But the other emotion, the helplessness, the despair.

The betrayal.

She went to her stack of trade magazines, with their glossy covers and unreal faces shining at her in the minimal light. She sat on the edge of the fainting couch and turned pages, not knowing

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what she was looking for, but knowing she would recognize it when she saw it.

An hour later she moved from the trade magazines to *People*. An hour after that, she moved from *People* to *Entertainment Weekly*, from *Entertainment Weekly* to *Premiere*. And there she stopped, at an issue almost a year old, a small black and white photo laid out kitty-corner next to a larger color shot. The article's title was "Designer Wars," and it referred to a lawsuit brought by one fashion designer against a major motion picture company, claiming that the costume designer had stolen the fashion designer's fall look for a film that premiered a week before the fashion designer's major show.

The fashion designer, Paul Devlin, was in the black-and-white photograph, looking as furious, as disgruntled, and as betrayed as the designer Corry had photographed.

Paul Devlin was the man Anita had been talking to.

Paul Devlin, who, Corry remembered, lost that lawsuit only a few weeks before Kendall's murder. Paul Devlin, whose black-and-white photograph rested on top of a cutout of a fuller color shot, featuring the costume designer, a studio head, and their attorney.

One Romer Dee.

Scorpino did the rest. He did the interviews, he found the witnesses, he made the arrest.

And he volunteered to tell Jas and Romer.

Corry thought she was out of it, but her mind would not let her rest. It kept returning to the crime, placing each image in a series of photographs, accompanied by rock music, and the clickety-click of a shutter.

Kendall, arriving early, hair pulled back, fresh scrubbed face, a smile, so like Romer's, so much a Dee.

She sets her equipment down, finds her chair, chats with one of the other hairdressers. Anita stops, says hello, and soon there is a group around her, explaining, prodding, talking.

Her voice rises above the rest, inflections so familiar that Devlin stops, listens, frowns. He drops what he is doing, orders the hairdressers away from Kendall. She smiles—oh, that smile—and it is her last.

He takes her to one of the dressing areas, accuses her of spying for her brother, for the scum in L.A., for the studio, for another movie company. His voice carries, as does hers. She yells back,

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calls him paranoid, then says the fatal words: *If my brother finds out, he'll—*

If my brother
finds.
out

The slap echoes through the wide empty room, and the dressers turn away. The stagehands walk to the other part of the stage, the lighting guys go higher on the catwalk, Anita examines the runway. They've heard it before, the shouting, the slaps. Violence is a part of the life here, although they don't admit it much, like they don't admit the drugs and the sex and the smell of vomit in the bathrooms.

If my brother
finds
out

Someone turns on the rock music, testing the system, they later say, and after fifteen minutes, Devlin reappears. He has changed shirts, changed suits, but no one thinks anything of it. A show is about to happen and he must be dressed properly. It is all about appearance, all about looks. Kendall doesn't return, but that's not uncommon either. For some inexplicable reason, a designer hates her, and backstage, in this industry, the designer is God.

Scorpino didn't understand why people who had refused to volunteer information gave that information so readily when he confronted them with a name and a suspicion. But Corry understood, and she wondered if she would have been any different. The fear of losing work, of losing connections, sometimes meant more than other people's pain, other people's lives.

None of the witnesses ratted on Devlin. They all figured someone else had.

They all figured someone else would pay, not realizing that someone else already had.

The next morning, she called her bank and got the balance on her freedom fund. Half of what she earned in a year, photographing skinny girls who passed for beautiful in the United States. All night, she had been thinking of Kendall, and Kendall's choice to leave the money, leave the power, leave the riches her face could give her, and come here, to do what she really wanted.

Corry didn't want to photograph women who wore ridiculous clothing, who tortured themselves in the name of beauty, and

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whose images encouraged other women to do the same.

She wanted to publish the other photos, the candid photos, the ones she hadn't realized she had shot, the ones of the matrons laughing at the strange outfits, and the angry designer, and the ones of Kendall, living her life as only she knew how.

Corry could live on half her earnings. She could live on a fourth if she had to. And there were other jobs outside the fashion industry. Photographs for hire which suited her better than another view of a thin-as-a-twig leg wearing striped silk, ending in an oversized shoe.

She called and canceled her part in the stadium shoot. Then she wrote letters asking that she be taken off the circuit for a while, that the magazines give her fashion assignments to someone else.

She planned to deliver the letters in person, but instead she found herself in front of Kendall's brownstone at ten A.M., sitting on the stone steps, shivering in the late-morning chill.

Waiting, for Jas. For Romer.

Scorpino was planning to tell them first thing.

They arrived together in a cab that Romer paid for. Jas slipped out the side, his massive body unfolding like a tent. He had been crying, his face swollen and blotchy. He saw Corry on the stoop and did not say hi, running past her, the door of the building slamming behind him.

Romer slid out and stood curbside as the cab drove away. His suit was pressed, his shoes shined, his hair combed. His face was blank and his eyes were dark holes in his skin. She wondered how she'd ever confused him with Kendall. His face was his own.

She got up slowly and walked down the stairs to him.

"Are you going to yell at me too?" he asked. He didn't move, but something in his stance stopped her as easily as if he had blocked her with his hand.

"For what?" she asked, genuinely perplexed. He couldn't have known. He couldn't be blamed for another man's craziness, for another man's hate.

"For disgracing this family, for sending Kendall to her death, for making deals with guilty men."

A chill ran down her back. "The studio stole the designs?"

"No, the costume designer stole the designs. The studio just decided to back him up. And I backed them up, for attorney's fees and a million-dollar countersuit." He smiled, but the look didn't reach his eyes. "They thought that was small, a nuisance amount for a nuisance case."

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"You won," she said.

"I *lost.*" He spat the word. He meant Kendall, not the case. "If I had known—"

"But you don't know," she said. "We never know."

"Don't we?" he asked. "What's right about countersuing a man for demanding credit for his own designs?"

"What's right about beating a lawyer's sister to death?"

He closed his eyes, tilted his head back, and gritted his teeth. This time, she did go to him, slipped her arm around him, and led him back to the stoop. She could feel the tension in each muscle in his body, the effort of keeping up appearances, of hiding everything he thought and felt.

She helped him down, kept her arm around him, and leaned her head on his shoulder. She didn't feel the effort in her own body. She had done it so long, she couldn't feel the strain anymore. And she had coped by looking at the world through lenses, by creating images to hide the reality, the viciousness she saw in others—and in herself.

He sighed, shuddered, and she lifted his chin with a single finger. The beauty of his face was enhanced by the tears spotting his cheeks. The light caught the water, making his skin shine.

The secret was not in seeing beauty or viciousness, but in seeing both, and everything else. The secret was in seeing clearly. Corry hadn't known Kendall, but Kendall had known Corry, and had liked what she saw.

Corry stood, held out her hand. "Come on," she said. "I know a place with great espresso and great desserts."

He looked up at her, his eyes bloodshot, his hair ruffled by the faint breeze. "You're not going to make me feel better."

"I'm not going to try." Although she might try explaining what Kendall's death had forced her to think about, about images, and reality, and the distortion of a lens.

He took her hand, let her pull him up, and when he reached her side, he didn't let go. Their fingers threaded together, united in their ignorance, united in their strength, united in their guilt.

They made their way together to the cross street, turned, and found themselves in a crowd. Humans on a runway, clothes off the rack and mismatched, bodies lumpy and old. There was no recorded music, no announcements, only the squeal of brakes, the honking of horns, the occasional shouts from angry drivers.

This was reality, and Corry felt no need to frame it into a single image.●

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STEFAN MITRAS

by Peter Turnbull

Ray Sussock leaned back in his chair and folded his copy of that particular morning's *Glasgow Herald*. He leaned to one side and crossed yesterday's date, the seventh of July, off on the Police Mutual calendar which hung on the wall beside his desk. It was a hot, cloudless day, a little too close for his liking, but it was the height of summer. Outside, in the city, the sun was cracking the flags; in the parks the city's youth basked in swimwear. Those showing more caution, those aware of the depletion of the ozone layer, tended to move from shade to shade in order to reach their destination. Sussock reached forward and switched on the modest battery-operated fan which he had clipped to the side of his desk. It amused him to think that despite the weather the nights were already getting longer. But that was the way of it in the northern climates; no sooner, it seemed, had you emerged from the winter, no sooner had you received a pleasant reminder of how warm can be the sun, how lush and green the foliage, how blue the sky, and how cloudless, than the slow but inexorable slide towards the snow and the slush begins. Sussock glanced at his watch: 09:00. The rush hour would just now be subsiding and the temperature had only begun to climb. Today would be hot. He pulled a pile of files towards him and reached for the topmost one. Each file represented an open case, an unsolved crime, and each had records to be added to it.

His phone rang. There was something insistent about it, he thought, a certain jarring to the tone. He pushed the files to one side and reached for his pad and ballpoint whilst picking up the phone and holding it wedged between his left ear and shoulder.

"DS Sussock," he said.

"Control, sir." The owner of the voice was youthful, nervous, anxious to get it right. Sussock pictured a young constable, probably still living with his parents, holding the phone in sweaty palms.

"Yes?"

"Radio message from Papa Tango Foxtrot. They have attended a

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code fifteen and report two suspicious deaths. The fire brigade are in attendance and wish to hand over. CID attendance is requested."

"I see. Address, please."

Control gave an address in Old Drumchapel.

"I know that street," Sussock said involuntarily. "Because of a personal rather than a police matter," he added, by means of explanation. "What information do you have?"

"Two elderly ladies, found deceased in their home by the fire brigade, who attended the fire. Papa Tango Foxtrot wasn't very clear, sir. The officer sounded shaken. I have no further information."

"All right, laddie," Sussock growled. "I'll take a drive out there, see what I see."

What Sussock saw were two fire appliances standing in a suburban street with hosepipes leading from them and from hydrants towards a modest grey pebble-dashed bungalow sitting in a neatly tended garden. He also saw the fire inspector's car and Papa Tango Foxtrot. All the official vehicles had blue lights flashing. He saw a crowd of concerned rather than curious neighbours, mostly elderly; they looked on but did not press against the blue and white police tape. Sussock sometimes despaired of humanity. He knew that if this incident had occurred in one of the schemes, like the nearby Drumchapel, the crowds would be thronging the scene, curious not concerned. They would be pressing against the police line with much the same gaping awe that people once displayed when watching public executions. But this was Old Drumchapel, as distinct from "the Drum" itself. Here the people seemed to be mostly middle-aged to elderly, here they bought their houses rather than rented damp apartments from the city, here they kept neat, well-tended gardens of modest proportions. Up in "the Drum" the open spaces were littered with domestic refuse, discarded needles, and dead dogs. But this was Old Drumchapel, eager and anxious to be different and separate from "the Drum," just visible on the skyline.

Sussock entered the house. The smell of burning filled the air, pervaded at a deeper level by the sickly rich smell of burnt meat. The firefighters were grim-faced, packing up their equipment with silent efficiency, and with the air about them of having done a distasteful job.

"Fire Inspector's in the room, sir." A young female firefighter nodded to the living room of the bungalow. She looked to be about

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twenty years old but had the eyes of a veteran with as many years service as had Sussock. Too many.

"Thanks." Sussock stepped into the front room. A youthful officer-class man in uniform and a braided cap stood in the centre of the room. He nodded to Sussock. "Two victims," he said, pointing to the corner of the room. Sussock caught his breath as he made out the charred remains of two human beings huddled together.

"As you see, there is a clear seat of the fire in the middle of the carpet, just in front of the hearth, some burned material in the hearth itself. Strange on a day like today. But the fire blocked the victims' escape to the door and so they backed up against the wall. The fire is deliberate, not accidental, and has caused two suspicious deaths. There is no danger of further combustion. We've checked the house, there are no other occupants save for a terrified, if not traumatised, springer spaniel. It's rigid with fear in the kitchen. So I'll hand over to you. I make the time 09:57."

"Agreed," said Sussock without checking his own watch; the time seemed reasonable and exact enough to be accurate. Besides, what was a few minutes here or there. "I'm DS Sussock, P Division."

"Fire Inspector Harrison."

Sussock nodded. "Can you tell me anything else about the fire?"

"Well," Harrison consulted his notepad, "we received the three-nines call at 09:14 hours. The crew of the first appliance to arrive saw the interior of the house well ablaze. They broke the windows to get at the blaze, which caused the flames to flare with the sudden inrush of oxygen, but they knew that would happen so they didn't break the glass until they were ready with the hoses, and they vanquished the fire from the outside as a second team broke the door down. It is as you see, and as I said, a clear seat of fire on the carpet just in front of the hearth. I'd say petrol was poured and a match tossed. The two victims, believed to be elderly spinster ladies, retreated from the flames, but were trapped against the wall. Poor wee souls."

"Aye . . ." Sussock nodded in agreement. He could think of little else to say. He stepped back into the sun, walked to his car, and requested the attendance of Dr. Chan.

"Two ladies by the name of Sanderson, apparently." PC Hamilton consulted his notebook. "It was their neighbour, the occupant of the next house down, towards Great Western Road, who noticed the smoke billowing up through the chimney and she called the fire brigade. The lady, the neighbour, says that the occupants of

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the house were elderly, in their seventies, known as Tessie and Betty. It was assumed that their given names were Theresa and Elizabeth, but only assumed, because they were Polish by origin."

"Polish?" Sussock shielded his eyes from the sun as a British Midland jet moaned low overhead, wheels down, on its final approach to Glasgow Airport. "Anybody see anything?"

"Not that we've been able to determine as yet, sir."

But a man standing close by said, "I did. I saw something."

Sussock and Hamilton turned toward the man. He was short, in his sixties, wore a trim silver beard. He looked relaxed in a short-sleeved shirt and white trousers and sandals. "Don't know if it was significant, of course, never do, do you?"

"What exactly did you see, sir?"

"Two young lads."

"Young?"

"Early twenties."

"I see."

"I live across the road. That's my bungalow there, number sixteen, yellow door. I saw two lads leave that house just a few minutes before the house caught fire."

"Really?"

"Aye, really. They were calm, unhurried, they didn't look worried. In fact, they turned and looked at the house as if checking that all was well. They drove off in a white van. Again, drove off at normal speed, didn't race away. There was nothing about them that was suspicious until the fire started. That made them very suspicious, to my way of thinking."

"Could you describe them please, sir?" Sussock asked, and as he did so his eye was drawn to the arrival of Dr. Chan. "If you'd give the description to the constable here, I'll have to speak to the police surgeon."

"Aye . . ." The man turned his attention to PC Hamilton but was unable to hide his disappointment in being abandoned to a very junior officer. "Well, I think that they were brothers."

"What makes you say that, sir?"

"Their overall manner, the way they walked, the way they looked. They were not identical twins, but the way they carried themselves was the same; their faces were different, but my eye moved easily from one face to the other and back again." Hamilton nodded and said that he understood, and overheard Sussock welcome Dr. Chan, saying, "I think you'll find this a formality, Doctor, there's not a lot left of the bodies. . . ." Hamilton returned his atten-

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tion to the elderly man. "Can you describe the two youths, sir?"

"Well, young, like I said, twenties, light-coloured hair, bronzed, they two didn't shelter from the sun. They wore tracksuits, except they're not called tracksuits anymore, they're of a different material and they're called something else . . ."

"Shell suits."

"If that's what they're called. Shiny, brightly coloured material?"

"That's them, highly inflammable. I had one and I chucked it away when I found how easily they burned. I have this thing about death or injury by fire. That's why I'm pleased I have not had to go inside this house."

"I can bet. Well, like I said, these two lads came out of the house, both with blue and white shell suits, calm as you please, turned and checked the house, and drove off. Now the van had a sign on the side, foreign name, and then 'Gardeners,' so it may be that they were looking at the garden, as if quoting for a job. Maybe they had nothing to do with the fire at all."

"We won't know that until we've had a wee chat with them. Would you recognise them again?"

"Hard to say. Probably not. I only glanced at them and, like I said, there was nothing about them to make me take an interest. I've never seen them before."

"What of the deceased, sir? What do you know about them?"

"Their names. The lady who lives next-door to them, she'll tell you more than I can; they practically lived in each other's houses, her and the sisters. Mrs. Hunt is her name, widowed an awful lot of years, so she is."

"Aye, son." Mrs. Hunt was a slender, silver-haired lady who sat in an upright chair in a room which smelled heavily of air freshener. She was neatly dressed, and her frail body contained what Hamilton rapidly found to be a mind which was still as sharp as a tack, as fresh as a frosty morning. "We knew each other for twenty years about, really since they came to the West from Poland. They were nice women, they and their sister left the East by some adventure. They never talked about it; I don't think it was a pleasant episode. Anyway, they took a Scottish name so as to blend. Their real name was something like Gertal, something like that . . ."

"Do you know where their sister lives?"

"Not the exact address, but she lives there with her two sons."

Hamilton's heart missed a beat. "Two sons?"

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"Two young men in their twenties; they never called. I mean the nephews never called to see the sisters, not for ten years or so. Selfish lads, I suppose. Sometimes the sister called, Christmastime, Easter, times like that, but they were cold towards each other. I had the impression of bad blood between them, that and the fact that their sister was an awful lot younger. They were in their seventies; their sister, who stays in Clydebank, is still in her fifties, an unplanned late child, I suppose. She's by herself, came over with her boys when they were babes in arms. The sisters said her husband was a bad lot, always in trouble with the police over in Poland. Daresay she grabbed her weans and walked out on him, daresay it was like that. She still calls herself by his family's name, Mita, Mitra, one or the other."

Hamilton returned to the locus. He stepped into the hall, not wishing to enter the room where the corpses still lay. The smell of burning hung heavy despite open doors and smashed windows. "Sarge!"

"Yes?" Ray Sussock stepped from the living room into the hall.

"We have a next of kin, Sarge. A lady in Clydebank is believed to be sister to the deceased, a lady called Mita or Mitra. . . . I would have thought there'd be an address book in the house."

"Yes . . . yes. Let's look for it, stay together, and when you can, will you phone the Animal Welfare people about the spaniel?"

"The spaniel?"

"It's in the kitchen, frozen with fear."

"Will do, Sarge."

It was 10:37 hours.

14:01 hours.

Sussock sat in Donoghue's office. Donoghue pulled gently on his pipe as he listened to Sussock's summation of the fire and the suspicious deaths in a bungalow in Old Drumchapel. Sussock's chest hurt as the smoke from Donoghue's pipe reached his lungs. Donoghue, the younger but senior officer, exercised the right to smoke in his own office, but again noticed the lines of weariness etched in Sussock's face. "You managed to locate the sister?"

"Yes. We found an address in their address book, one 'Bozzena' Mitras of Hood Street in Clydebank."

"Sounds right."

"It was the only Clydebank address in their book, anyway. Hamilton and WPC Willems visited and broke the news."

"Reaction?"

"Cold, apparently. Surprised, shocked, but not distressed."

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"I see. Might be a stone to turn over there, do you think?"

"I think so, sir." Sussock coughed but Donoghue continued to suck and blow. "I'd particularly like a chat with her two sons. We have the witness who reports two young men leaving the locus just before the fire."

"Yes, I recall you saying. Had the look of brothers about them. Now, I've had a couple of phone calls whilst you were out. Both will interest you."

"Oh?"

"Yes, briefly, the fire investigation officer has confirmed an incident of wilful fire raising. The accelerant was probably lighter fuel and was ignited by a crude but efficient time delay system, involving a cigarette, a length of material, and a box of matches. The cigarette, which was of the king-size variety, thus taking longer to burn down, was lit, and smouldered towards the tip, where it was fastened to a box of matches in such a way that the burning end reached the phosphorous match heads. When that happened they flared, igniting the material, being a long strip of cotton which had been soaked in accelerant. The fire ran along the cotton until it reached the pool of accelerant on the carpet and, *whoosh.*"

"*'Whoosh,'* as you say. It was quite a mess."

"But it possibly accounts for the leisurely way in which the two youths walked from the bungalow. You can get a long way in the ten minutes that it would take a king-size cigarette to smoulder down to the filter." Donoghue paused to relight his pipe with his gold-plated cigarette lighter. "The second phone call came from the good Dr. Reynolds of the GRI. He's not fully completed the postmortems but phoned through his initial findings that the two sisters were dead before the fire was started. By only an hour or so, no sign of rigor."

"They were?"

"They were. Looks like the fire was started to cover up a double murder. There is no trace of carbon in the airways and the blood is of normal colour—where it remains, that is. The corpses were both badly charred, as you saw."

"As I'll not easily forget."

"I can imagine. It appears a very clumsy attempt to make it look as though a hot coal or something fell from the hearth and set the carpet on fire, thus trapping the elderly ladies between the flames and the wall."

"A domestic fire in this weather?"

Donoghue nodded. "An ill-conceived method of murder. This was

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done in anger, Ray. Someone more cold-blooded would have employed a different method to camouflage the crime. Any sign of forced entry?"

"None."

"So they may have known their attacker?"

"The fire brigade found the door locked."

"So the attacker took the key and locked the door behind him?"

"Looked that way, sir."

"Good point. Those two young men were gardeners, you say?"

"They apparently had a van with a legend on the side indicating a jobbing gardener."

"So what do you think, Ray? Two old ladies wanted help with their garden, advertised for help, and two lads came, looked at the job, overpowered them, nicked valuables from the house, knocked the old ladies off, set fire to the house, and legged it? Or am I getting cynical?"

Sussock grinned. "You're getting cynical, sir. There was no sign of the house having been ransacked, there was jewellery in the casket on the dresser in the bedroom and cash on the sideboard. No robbery occurred."

"So why, then? Why did two elderly ladies who got on well with their neighbours open their door to two well-built young men never seen in the street before, who then leave some time later, quite calmly, but having murdered the two ladies and attempted to cover their tracks by starting a fire? Who's on the back shift?"

"Richard King."

"Right, if you'll hand over to him and ask him to follow up on Mrs. Mitras's two sons."

"I'd like to do that, if you don't mind, sir. The sense of following through appeals to me."

"As you wish, Ray. As you wish."

Bozzena Mitras lived in a cleanly kept, council-owned house in a quiet street in Clydebank. The housing in this part of the city Sussock found to be more English than conventionally Scottish: small boxlike houses, each with its own small patch of garden, rather than a flat in a stone tenement. She allowed Sussock to enter her home after scrutinizing his ID. He saw her to be a trim woman in her mid fifties, a woman who in her prime, in his eyes, would have been fetching in the extreme. The living room of her home was dominated by an impressive collection of crystal, kept in a glass-fronted cabinet. Two photographs stood

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on the mantelpiece, each of a young man.

Sussock sat when invited to do so and after the preliminaries he said, "You don't appear to be upset about the death of your sisters?"

"I'm not, if I must be honest." Bozzena Mitras spoke with an accent which was clearly Polish, but occasionally a word with a distinct west of Scotland pronunciation would creep in. "There were many years between us and I cared not for them."

"Oh?"

"A family matter."

"They seemed to have friends."

"So did Adolf Hitler."

A silence.

"Are you saying your sisters were that evil?" Sussock pressed.

"Yes," she said through gritted teeth. "They were that evil."

Sussock remained silent. He knew she would tell him what she meant, he knew she wanted to tell someone.

"They never married. They were always jealous of me. I was younger, I was more attractive than they had been, I married a wonderful man . . . my Stefan . . . he was a dissident, he was often arrested for speaking out against the state, but the authorities never had the evidence they needed, my Stefan was always so careful. They never found out where he kept his printing press for his newspaper, which spoke of freedom and truth. This was when things were bad in Poland. My Stefan was an idealist and he died for his ideals . . . but he was a lovely man, big but gentle and kind." She buried her head in her hands and then recovered and continued. "He was the father of my boys." She looked lovingly at the photographs on the mantelpiece. "My Stefan and my Ivan. Without them I don't know what I would have done. They are gardeners now. Stefan, my Stefan, was a gardener class two in Poland, so his sons are now gardeners. They are self-employed, self-employment was forbidden in Poland.

"My Stefan was betrayed. The police found his press. They came for him at seven o'clock one morning when the boys were still infants. That was the last I saw of him. I couldn't visit him because he was 'political.' " She paused. "Then after some weeks, about six weeks, we were told that he had died in the prison hospital. He was thirty-two when he died. We were not told how he died, just that he had died. We buried him one winter's day in a rainstorm; me, my sisters, and Stefan's parents were the only mourners. My boys were still too young to understand.

"Then we left Poland. Me and my sisters and my sons. My sis-

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ters had somehow obtained permission for us to come to the West. I didn't want to remain. I loved Poland, I still do. We love our homeland, but I had no wish to live with that political system. They killed my Stefan because he spoke out. So we came west; we came to Glasgow because there is a large Polish community here, mostly elderly now, like my sisters. The children of the Poles consider themselves Scottish and grow away from the community.

"Then something terrible happened when we had been in Scotland for ten years; it was the second blackest day in my life. My sisters told me that it was they who had betrayed Stefan in exchange for permission to leave the country. They couldn't marry so I was not allowed a husband either, but I could have children so that they could at least have nephews. They waited until the children were settled in school and knew only English, so that I could not leave. Then they told me."

"I'm sorry," said Sussock, "very sorry."

"Yes, I think you are, Mr. Sussock. I think you are a sincere man. Have you a wife?"

"In a sense. We are separated, a divorce is pending."

"I'm sorry that it didn't work for you. Stefan and I were together for nine happy years."

"You can at least look back on that."

"Oh, I do, I relive those years. But I can't help thinking what we could have had but for my evil sisters, even in Poland."

"Do your sons know what happened to their father?"

"They do now. I kept it from them, but then Ivan, he's the youngest, he turned twenty-one just last week, and so both were now men. I thought eighteen was too young, no matter what the law says, so I waited until Ivan was twenty-one. I told them about their father. I told them that was why we had suddenly stopped visiting their aunts in Old Drumchapel when they were about eleven and twelve. They were upset, angry, they went out and came home drunk. They don't normally drink."

"Where are they now?"

"At the Polish Club in Hyndland. They're doing the gardens there this week. They left early this morning, earlier than normal. They said they wanted to start work at seven A.M. I suppose it's because it's such fine weather at the moment."

Sussock stood. "Yes, I suppose that's the reason." He felt suddenly heavy-hearted. "The Polish Club in Hyndland, you say?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I'd like a wee chat with them."●

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From the Casebook of Gideon Oliver

A SLIGHT MISTAKE

by Aaron Elkins

All in all, I'd have to say it was the most bizarre case I've ever been involved in. And the shortest. And the funniest; not too many murder investigations end up making me laugh out loud, but this one did.

It started routinely enough. I was in my third-floor office in Boas Hall at the University of Washington's Port Angeles campus, a little bored, a little restless, a little jet-lagged. In a word, crummy. I had just come back on a red-eye flight from the European Anthropological Association meetings in Frankfurt. My first teaching session, a paleopathology seminar, was at three that afternoon, and I was reviewing my notes with less than my usual well-known enthusiasm when the chirp of the telephone jarred me out of a grumpy half-doze. On the line was my old and good friend, Special Agent John Lau of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Seattle Office.

"Hiya, Doc, welcome back, got a couple of hours? Got something we could use your help on."

Nothing could have perked me up more. When John calls in the middle of a work day, it means FBI business, and if it's me he's calling it means bones. And when the FBI says bones, they *mean* bones; not a lecture *about* bones or a seminar *pertaining to* bones, or a discussion *concerning* bones, but *bones,* the real things, mysterious, evocative, and endlessly engrossing.

It's not that I have anything against teaching, you understand, but there is nothing like getting your hands on the real thing every once in a while.

"I'm free until three," I said.

"Good, guess what we found."

"Bones," I said.

"Hey, how did you know? Did you see the news last night?" He sounded disappointed.

"Just a guess, John. Look, I don't think I'd have time to get into Seattle and do anything useful before class. How about tomorrow?"

"I'm not in Seattle," John said, "I'm out in your neck of the

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woods. So are the bones. You'd have plenty of time, at least to have a look."

The remains in question, he explained, were just inside the border of Olympic National Park, in a meadow on the northern flank of Burnt Mountain, near a remote, little-used logging road and no more than ten miles from my office. They had been found a day earlier by some Canadian backpackers who had been digging a latrine and were disagreeably surprised when their shovel struck a human skull about five inches down. Since it was on federal land, the FBI had been called in. Within a few hours they had unearthed a near-complete skeleton, missing only the small bones of the hands and feet, one of the clavicles, and a few of the vertebrae—the toothsome, easy-to-haul-away items most frequently carried off by rodents and other scavengers. The edges of the scapulas had been chewed a bit, John said, and some of the long bones had suffered some gnawing at their ends, but relatively speaking—relative, that is, to other shallow, anonymous burials in the woods—the remains were pretty well-preserved.

The find, complete with the standard, ghoulish video coverage, had made last night's six o'clock KIRO-TV news, and at seven-fifteen a hulking, shaking, near-hysterical drifter of thirty-four named Bud Walenta had walked into the Clallam County Sheriff's Office in Port Angeles and confessed to the murder of his eighteen-year-old Swedish girlfriend two years before.

He had beaten her to death in a dope-addled quarrel over money, he said, had stuffed her body in the trunk of his car, and had driven up to Burnt Mountain in the dead of night to bury her there. At the time he had convinced the police that she had run off to Mexico with another man, but now—seeing her bones, her poor, fragile, pathetic bones on televison—he could no longer live with what he'd done and was ready to face his punishment.

This morning, when the FBI had driven him to the meadow he had been in a mumbling daze, possibly coming down off some drug-induced high from the day before. He'd been flustered and indecisive, thinking at first that he'd buried the girl at the base of a dead, lightning-split fir tree some thirty feet from the actual site, but as soon as he saw the burial he broke down. "It's her, it's her . . . Inge, Inge, forgive me . . ." He'd collapsed in a moist, blubbering heap and been hauled away.

And now it was my job to begin the official skeletal analysis: the determination of age, sex, height, race, cause of death, and anything else I could find. Later, I would probably appear as

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an expert witness at the trial.

The FBI had done a good job of exhumation, removing the dirt but leaving the disarticulated bones themselves undisturbed. The photographer had already come and gone. I opened my attaché case and laid out sliding calipers, spreading calipers, 20-millimeter ruler, tape measure, magnifying glass, blank recording forms, and tables. Then I got down on my knees to take my first good look.

And that was when I laughed out loud. John, standing a few feet away, came over scowling. "Something funny?"

I sat back on my haunches, still chuckling. "Well, aside from the fact that this is a male, not a female, that he's a closer to forty-five than to eighteen, that he's American Indian, not Scandinavian, and that he's been in the ground for, oh, eleven or twelve thousand years, not two years—aside from all that, no, there isn't anything funny."

John looked so bewildered that I couldn't help laughing again. I explained as simply as I could, demonstrating as I went. The massive brow ridges, nuchal crests, and mastoid processes practically shouted maleness; the sutures in the skull were sealed shut and almost invisible, a reliable indication of middle age; the flat, broad malar (or cheek) bones, the broad, U-shaped palate, and the so-called shovel-shaped incisors added up to a distinctly American Indian profile, laughably unlikely to occur in Scandinavia. And as for the time the bones had been in the ground . . .

"Here," I said, and plopped a femur into his hand.

"Wow, heavy."

"That's because it's not bone, it's stone."

He frowned at it. "Stone . . . ?"

I looked up at him from the ground. "It's petrified; the organic matter has been replaced by mineral content. And that doesn't happen in two years—or two centuries. This is an early-man burial, John, not a recent murder."

And that was when John laughed out loud.

"Offhand," I went on, "I'd say this would have to be one of the post-Cordilleran people, the mastodon hunters. He's been here since the last glacial retreat." I got to my feet and brushed off my knees. "Your man Walenta appears to have made a slight mistake."

"I'll say, but the guy's guilty as hell. What do you suppose he did do with the girl?"

"For starters," I said, getting to my feet, "I'd try looking near the base of that split fir tree." I smiled again. "Might as well earn my fee. Got a spare shovel?" ●

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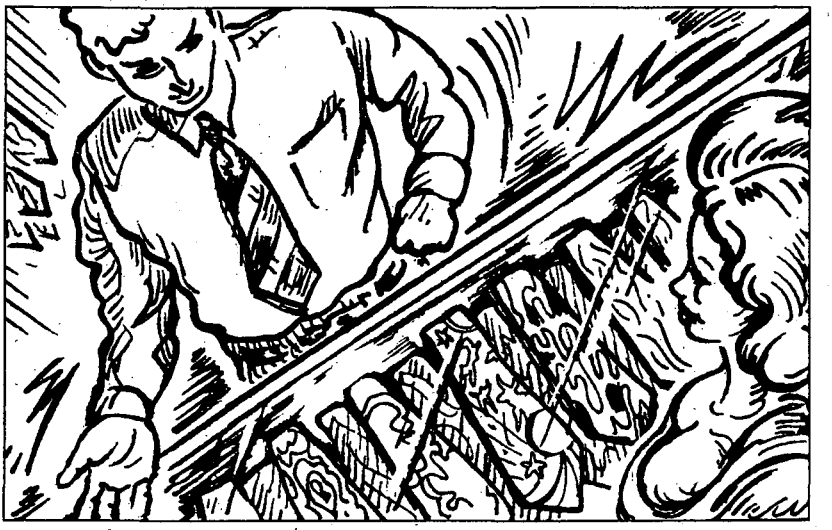

Art by Mark Evan Walker

THE TIES THAT BIND

by Donald Olson

Like a number of other guys in my circumstances, I've worked off and on at the Tie Bar in Albright's. It's certainly the least exacting of jobs and leaves me plenty of time to do My Thing. Never mind what that is, it has nothing to do with what happened; all I'll say is that it's not illegal even if some people, maybe most people, would consider it socially objectionable.

What is nice about the Tie Bar is that the manager, who's anything but an old stick when it comes to gauging the finer points of merchandising, is less interested in a guy's experience and references than in the cut of his jaw, the whiteness of his teeth, the way his hair grows, and the charm of his smile. The reason for this is simple: Most ties are bought by women, and nothing can put a female shopper in more of a dither than trying to choose the right tie for the right man. If there's some prissy old crock behind the counter, she's very likely to forget about the tie and move to the

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cosmetics counter. She *knows* her old man is crazy about Obsession for Men, so no problem. But if the guy behind the counter looks like an All-American quarterback even if he doesn't know a forward pass from a fumble, she's more likely to linger, and the longer she lingers the better chance she'll buy that absurdly expensive tie the hunky young guy with the alluring smile persuades her is the perfect choice.

In the twenty-five years since Donald Olson's first story for us was published he has established a loyal following. We frequently get letters from readers who say they look for his name as soon as they receive an issue. We daresay this is partly because Mr. Olson writes about experiences so many readers have had—like selling clothing in a busy department store . . . ¶

And let's face it, the Tie Bar in Albright's not infrequently presents opportunities to meet the sort of women—upper crust, married, and bored—that you wouldn't meet in Felipe's Wine Bar down the street. I personally welcomed these opportunities rather than relying solely on that swine Jerome, who seemed always to call late in the evening when all you wanted to do was curl up in bed with Jane Austen or Muriel Spark and then insisted you hare off to the Plaza for a late-night date with some old gal in from Dallas who's "very choosy indeed, lovey. Only *you* can fill the bill."

But this is not about me, it's about this dreadful thing that had its start at the Tie Bar in Albright's.

Let me set the scene. One of those sparkly autumn mornings when you look good because you feel good, and I did look good; the silver-framed oval mirror on the counter confirmed the fact: a bloom beneath the tan, no shadows under the button-bright eyes, an incomprehensible urge to smile at everything and everyone, probably because the night before had been one of those blissfully quiet, cozy evenings undisturbed by any phone calls, even from that swine Jerome, no company but Janie Austen's, whom no one could possibly accuse of being an exhausting companion for an evening's frolic.

It was a sales day at Albright's, not the mad scramble one might expect at your down-market department store, more of a restrained carnival atmosphere. I was kept busy from the word go. In midmorning who should waltz up to the counter but Missy Hol-

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lenbeck (Mrs. Brooks Elverton Hollenbeck III). Missy and I went back a long way, Missy a far longer way back than me. She must be in her mid forties but holding up well. Missy was doing more than okay as a model when I first met her at the agency which had taken me on—provisionally, which I soon learned meant I might make the grade providing I was willing to work my buns off, discipline myself like an athlete, and live like a health nut training for the Olympics. Needless to say, I failed the course, and my subsequent stint in the theater ended no less ignobly. Call it the lazy bum syndrome for lack of a better term.

Missy flashed that brilliant smile which, among her other assets, had released her from the modeling grind into the arms of a well-heeled entrepreneur who owned a string of furniture galleries from Manhattan to Nyack.

"Buddy! How *nice* to see you. Is this what you're doing now?"

"Off and on. You know how it is."

"I haven't forgotten. You're looking terrific."

"You too."

"Liar. Look at my hair. I get fatter, it gets thinner. I've an appointment with Leonardo after lunch to see what can be done about it. But how divine to find you here, Buddy. You must help me pick out a tie for Brooks. His birthday's Saturday."

I'd first met Brooks at their wedding reception on Long Island. Mr. Conservative. I asked Missy what color his eyes were.

"Not as blue as yours, darling. Sort of dishwatery."

We began the search, discarding with a giggle anything with a taint of frivolity, finally narrowing the search to a muted blue and gold paisley and a navy and burgundy stripe, settling upon the latter. Missy showered me with thanks, as if I'd spared her a grueling ordeal.

"I'm free until two," she said. "You've been such a help, let me buy you lunch. They still have that restaurant upstairs?"

"Yes, but I'm not off till noon."

"No problem, I'll browse. I suppose the wigs here are ghastly."

"You don't need a wig, honey, you need Leonardo."

She agreed to meet me back at the counter at noon.

The remainder of the morning sped by. I made a number of sales and don't remember once giving my smile a rest. It must have been close to noon—the watch Margot DeFrees gave me is *très elegant* but less dependable than a sundial on a cloudy day—

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when a redhead with hair Missy would have killed for and a face and figure worthy of *Playboy* ambled up to the counter and began fingering the displays with an air of casual amusement. I rang up a sale, smiled at a satisfied matron, and turned my attention to the redhead.

"See anything you like, madame?"

"Not really." She had a slight but charming lisp. "I'm looking for something a bit more—saucy."

"You mean brighter?"

"Something more flamboyant than these. Something silly and brash."

Silly and brash? I opened the case and dug out a few of our gaudier ties.

"Oh yes, these are more like it." She held up a widish pink tie in a psychedelic pattern of what looked like astrological symbols in orange and chartreuse. Okay for a trip to the circus, maybe, or the trendiest disco. Personally, I wouldn't have worn it to take the dog for a walk on a dark night.

"For your husband, is it?" I ventured to ask.

"For *a* husband," she replied with the merest suggestion of a wink. I got the picture.

I became aware of Missy hovering at the end of the counter. Then I stared. Missy it was, but wearing a champagne-blond wig that wreathed her face in a mass of exuberant curls. She didn't meet my eye, intent as she was on watching my customer.

"I *love* it," the redhead squealed.

I felt it my duty to temporize. "But you're not going to wear it. Will it please *him?*"

She handed me the tie with a puckish smile. "We'll risk it."

Just then Anthony arrived to spell me for the lunch hour. I asked him to complete the sale.

"And gift wrap it, please," said the redhead.

I left them to it and joined Missy. As we walked away she whispered, "What man in his right mind would wear *that* horror?"

"Only a man who wants to humor his mistress at the expense of his taste."

"She may be that, darling, but I happen to know she's also a working girl."

"You know her?"

"I've seen her. She's on the sales staff at my husband's midtown store."

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I didn't mention the wig until we'd taken the escalator to the top floor and seated ourselves in the little bijou restaurant.

Missy said she'd had to do something in case Leonardo gave her bad news and I said, "My God, Missy, you make him sound like a doctor about to give you six months to live."

The earlier verve seemed to have deserted her. "That's the way I feel."

I knew that look, that tone of voice. The symptoms were unmistakable. "Trouble in paradise, Missy?"

She poked a curl away from her eye and breathed a long, eloquent sigh. "He wants a divorce."

"Brooks?"

"No, Billy Graham. Of course Brooks."

"But *why?"*

"He denies it, but it has to be another woman. What else?"

"That doesn't sound like Brooks."

The light fell across her face in such a way that I could detect faint stress lines of anxiety, like the brush strokes in a painting seen up close: She'd done a poor job on her makeup. "Not the Brooks you met. Not the Brooks I married. He's changed. He goes to the *gym,* for God's sake. He's joined a tennis club. What does that tell you?"

"He wants to get in shape."

"Oh, sure. When a man his age wants to get in shape, there's only one reason. I thought we had a good marriage. I gave up my career for him. I tried to be the perfect wife. Now this."

The salad was edible and the quiche not bad at all, yet neither of us took much interest in what we were eating.

"You think the wig's a mistake," she said dismally.

"I think you're trying to compete with someone who probably doesn't even exist."

"Well, the only other explanation is even worse. Even more demeaning. That he's bored with me. He didn't marry me for my brain cells and now that the rest of me is falling apart—"

"Oh, stop it, you've never looked better." Which, God forgive me, was far from the truth.

"If he came right out and said he doesn't love me anymore, even if he got angry and abusive and nasty I could cope with it, but he's so *relentlessly* polite. The way we all are with people who bore us . . . I do love him, you know. I couldn't bear to lose him. I don't know what I'd do."

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"If he seriously does want a divorce," I said, "I suppose there's nothing you can do about it, except make sure he pays."

"We both signed a pre-nup."

"Well, still, a good lawyer . . ."

There was more such talk, Missy repining, me trying to reassure her, glad I had only an hour for lunch. Then suddenly, as if her mind had taken an abrupt detour, her voice changed, quickened with excitement. "Buddy, are you doing anything Saturday night?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Come to dinner, please. I've planned a lovely birthday dinner for Brooks, just the two of us. What if I invited another man, a good-looking young man. Brooks has always taken me for granted, maybe that's been the problem."

"Make him jealous, you mean?" I said dubiously.

"What can I lose?"

"What can you gain?"

"Maybe if we show him I can still be attractive to another man, a younger man . . . You could flirt with me outrageously."

The idea left me cold. I didn't want to get mixed up in Missy's domestic troubles. "I don't know, Missy . . ."

"I'd pay you for your time, of course."

I tried not to betray my shock at this bald remark, but the look in her eyes made me guiltily aware that Missy knew more about my activities than I'd ever imagined. But how could she know? This was the first time our paths had crossed in years. And then I remembered that evening I'd escorted Lenore Vanderhoff to the opera and had run into Missy and Brooks in the foyer. Missy and Lenore had greeted each other like old friends. Lenore is a gossipy old hag, not a grain of discretion.

I didn't let it throw me. "Don't be silly," I said. "I can certainly do an old friend a favor without being *paid* for it."

"Then you'll do it? You'll come?"

"With pleasure," I said, trying to hide my irritation, "for all the good it'll do."

Her spirits revived after that, as if I'd provided her with a solution to all her problems. Wearing that bizarre wig, she seemed to me then pathetic in her eagerness to grasp at even so flimsy a straw in her determination to reawaken her husband's interest.

We left the restaurant and strolled along the mezzanine toward the escalator. Suddenly, looking over the rail, Missy grabbed my arm. "My God, look down there!"

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I followed her gaze and instantly spotted the flame-haired beauty who'd bought that rubbishy tie. Her arm was linked with that of a tall, fair-haired man as they looked at something on the jewelry counter.

"It's that *girl,*" said Missy in a scandalized whisper. "With Pierce Montgomery!"

"You know him?"

"He manages Brooks's midtown store. He has the sweetest little wife. Good heavens, do you suppose . . . ? While I was waiting for you I overheard that bimbo say she was buying that awful tie for *a* husband." Her voice tightened with anger. "See? See what these men are like? How could he be so brazen? He must know Betty Lou shops here. What if she saw them together?"

"They're probably just friends. Fellow workers."

"The way she's clinging to him? Use your head." Missy's air of furious resentment couldn't have been stronger if she'd caught her own husband in the act. "Pierce is just the type to wear a tie like that. He's such a jerk anyway. Poor Betty Lou."

"I hope you don't intend to tell her. You can't be sure—"

"Don't worry, I'll keep my mouth shut, but I'd like to give *him* a piece of my mind. Quick, let's get down there before they leave."

Clutching my arm as tightly as the redhead was clutching the presumably faithless Montgomery's, Missy hustled me to the escalator and then led me straight past the couple. Pausing, she said in a tone of sugarcoated acid: "Hi, Pierce. Buying something in diamonds for Betty Lou?"

Montgomery didn't seem at all flustered. "No, just looking. How are you, Missy? Do you know Glenda?"

Missy failed to acknowledge the girl's presence by so much as a nod or a look. "I haven't had that pleasure," she murmured, and giving Montgomery a seething glance she turned and sailed toward the exit, I following in her wake.

Missy turned to me as I was saying goodbye, her face still pale with anger, and anger out of all proportion, it seemed to me, to what she'd observed. The old Missy would have been merely amused. I felt that some key element in her personality had changed since I'd last seen her, her temperament was altogether different. How else to account for such unreasoning paranoid suspicions? She rather frightened me.

"You can be sure someone will spill the beans to Betty Lou," she

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said in parting. "She's so naive she'll probably swallow any lies Pierce tells her. Not me. If I were in her shoes I'd *kill* the bastard!"

The dinner party was a disaster. I arrived at the Hollenbeck duplex with a bottle of champagne and a bunch of roses for Missy. Having been dragooned into this farce I'd decided to play my role to the hilt. The least I could do for a good meal.

Missy, in powder-blue chiffon, was not wearing the wig, thank goodness, but Leonardo had done wonders with what he had to work with. There was no sign of Brooks.

"I told him yesterday not to be late," she said, "but it would be just like him to forget his own birthday, funny way he's been acting lately."

She put the flowers in a vase and beamed as I admired the table setting. The gift-wrapped tie box lay beside Brooks's plate. As she disappeared into the kitchen to check on the meal I asked Missy how she was going to explain my presence.

"I'll tell him I asked you when we lunched together. We must make him believe it wasn't the first time. Buddy, I have a good feeling about this. I can't wait to see the look on Brooks's face."

This pleasure seemed a long time in coming. The minutes dragged by, with no Brooks. Missy's increasing tension seemed to fill the room with an atmosphere of nerve-wracking suspense as she glanced repeatedly at the clock and dashed back and forth into the kitchen.

"What can be keeping him?" she kept asking.

"Maybe he really has forgotten."

"Oh no, I was just kidding. He never forgets birthdays, certainly not his own."

The light of anticipation gradually faded from Missy's eyes. Her movements became less hectic, there was a heaviness about her, a kind of ponderous lassitude. When nearly two hours had passed she said grimly: "We may as well eat—assuming anything's fit to eat by now."

Missy lit the candles with unsteady fingers. I poured the champagne and the death watch began, for that's what it seemed like. We ate in virtual silence; there seemed nothing to say. When the meal was finished Missy dragged herself into the other room and collapsed like a lump on the sofa. I cleared the table and rather than keep mournful vigil with Missy set about doing the dishes. She didn't try to stop me.

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Coming to the doorway, I said I'd better shove off.

"No! Please. Don't go. I don't want to be alone. God knows what I'd do. Oh, the bastard, the bastard!"

We finished off the champagne, which did nothing to lift her spirits, or mine. Only the relentless ticking of the clock broke the silence. At one point Missy roused herself to utter a false laugh. "Maybe we should move the party upstairs," she said. "Let him walk in and find us in bed. Wouldn't that be a howl."

"I've an idea it would be counterproductive."

"I've an idea you're right."

The champagne had made me sleepy, it always does, and I must have dozed off because I came suddenly awake when the front door slammed.

Brooks appeared in the doorway, supporting himself with both hands on the jamb. His hair was uncombed, he looked as disheveled as if he'd staggered away from a car crash, yet his face wore a silly look which might have indicated contrition or boozy amusement, for clearly he was all but falling-down drunk.

Eyes blazing, Missy rose to her feet. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Now don't be mad, Missy. Some of the guys insisted on taking me out for a few birthday drinks. Guess I lost track of time."

Missy gave a strangled cry as he stumbled forward. His collar was loose and the tie hung at a crazy angle across his shirt front. That ghastly, outrageously gaudy tie with the astrological symbols.

He seemed scarcely conscious of my presence as he lurched toward the stairs.

"Sorry, people, I've got to lie down before I fall down. I'm really sorry as hell, Missy."

Missy didn't utter a word as she watched him half-crawl up the stairs and when she turned to me her face was like death.

"The *guys* took him out for a drink! What kind of fool does he take me for? You saw it, didn't you? He's been with *her*. It wasn't Pierce. It was *him* she was buying that tie for."

She stalked into the dining room and came back holding the gift-wrapped tie box. She tore off the paper and took out the tie and when no amount of effort would cause it to rip in her hands she flung it to the floor.

There was nothing I could do, nothing I could say. I don't think she even heard me when I murmured goodbye.

❖ ❖ ❖

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The tie around Brooks's neck as he lay in his coffin was as conservative as the one I'd helped Missy pick out, but of course it was not the same tie. The police would be holding that one as evidence.

At the end of the service, as I was leaving, Pierce Montgomery came up to me.

"Excuse me, but you look familiar. You ever play for the Jets?"

"I'm not bad on the piano but I've never accompanied a group. Local band, are they?"

He gave me a funny look, as if I'd displayed visible signs of an incurable illness. "Sorry," I said. "Bad joke. Actually you probably remember seeing me in Albright's last week. I was with Missy."

"Ah yes, that's it . . . poor Missy."

"Poor Brooks."

He wagged his head in sorrow. "We all knew Missy was going off the rails, but what could you do? Betty Lou—my wife—tried to reason with her but Missy was obsessed with the notion that Brooks was cheating on her. It got so he hated to go home. He even threatened her with divorce, hoping that would snap her out of it."

I stared at him. "You mean he wasn't having a thing with what's-her-name—Glenda?"

"Good lord, no. What gave you that idea?"

"That day in Albright's. She bought that awful tie. Both Missy and I assumed from what she said that she was buying it for her married lover. And when Brooks came home that night wearing the damn thing, well, that's what freaked Missy out."

Freaked out was something of a euphemism. It must have been shortly after I'd left that Missy picked up the tie and went upstairs, found Brooks passed out on the bed, and strangled him with it.

"At first," I added, "seeing you and Glenda together in the store, Missy assumed *you* were having an affair with her."

"Unbelievable. That tie was a joke. Glenda picked it out for us. The boys and I gave it to Brooks when we were having a few drinks on his birthday."

Soon after that I quit my job at the Tie Bar, telling myself I couldn't bear another winter in New York. A buddy of mine in West Palm told me I should come down, it was a gold mine for guys like me, lots of restless wives and lonely well-heeled widows.

Hardly anyone wears a tie down here. ●

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THE MOLE

by David Dean

Stivac probed the soil gingerly with the tip of his cane, peering hard at the darkening lawn, his breath forming ragged little puffs of vapor that hung whitely in the air to mark his cautious locomotion. After only several yards of exploration, he discovered what he was searching for; the mole run.

Just as he had suspected, it lay only a short distance from his bricked patio, leading directly to the plants and flowers that formed its border. In the other direction, the slightly humped outline of pushed-up soil and exposed grass roots meandered towards the woods that crouched at the rear of his property.

David Dean was born and raised in a mill worker's town in Georgia but most of the inspiration for his stories comes from events in the shore community in New Jersey where he now lives. Mr. Dean is a policeman whose best-known character is a police detective. This time, however, he writes not of the men in blue but of a private citizen with a deadly grudge. ¶

Eagerly, he knelt down and was rewarded with excruciating pain in his left knee, the torn ligaments and strained muscles punishing him for his ardor. With a muffled cry, he heaved himself erect with the cane, his thin arm shaking with the effort. The muscles in his good leg quivered also with the sudden weight of his whole body, and for a moment he teetered precariously as the world wobbled in his vision and beads of sweat formed on his forehead, cooling with the touch of damp air that descended with the dusk.

Regaining his balance, he glanced about him, surprised at how quickly the color had drained from the landscape. The entire property had a murky, lunar quality, foreign and inhospitable. Even the windows of his house were dark rectangles peering sightlessly

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over his head. He shivered beneath his windbreaker and wondered what would have become of him had he fallen, invisible, on his own lawn.

Near his foot, he could make out a ragged hole in the run, a small cave-in whose edges still bore the imprint of his left heel from several days ago. Alarmed at how near he had come to repeating his disastrous fall he began angrily poking the soft, crumbling roof of the tunnel for the small architect of his injury. With each sharp thrust into its burrow, he imagined the mole's squeaks of surprise and terror as he pinned it squirming to the earth and carefully crushed its gray, sacklike body beneath the cane's large rubber tip.

The pain in his leg forgotten, he methodically stabbed along the length of the run, grunting lightly as he went. The cane felt as if it were an extension of his senses, a tactile probe, and he relished the sensation of each violent insertion, followed by a circular sweep to flush the plump, disgusting mole.

Once, he thought he felt a vibration, very slight, like something squirming between the shaft of his cane and the wall of the tunnel, and he redoubled his efforts, using both hands to spear the runway at what he hoped was just the right spot. His grunting became loud enough to startle the dog penned two houses away and it began to bark loudly.

Stivac reached the end of his yard and could go no farther. Panting with exertion, he leaned heavily forward, resting his forehead on the crook of the staff, beads of sweat dropping into the opened earth. A surprisingly dry, dusty odor wafted up from the ruined tunnel, in contrast to the damp topsoil and glistening grass that lay strewn about it. After a short spell of silence, the dog grew bored and ceased its challenges also. Raising himself tiredly up, Stivac turned to go in.

In the window of the house just next to his, the small, dark figure of his neighbors' nine-year-old daughter, face pressed to the glass, hands cupped around her eyes, peered intently out into the darkness, alerted by the dog.

He assured himself that she could not see him, but nonetheless felt embarrassed, a fleeting vision of himself hacking the earth making him feel ridiculous. This was quickly replaced by an ember of resentment that glowed hotly at her blatant inquisitiveness, her damned impertinence! He suspected she would think

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moles were cute, something warm and velvety to the touch, not the destructive pests they really were!

As he glared at her now through the intervening darkness, something rose from the chairback next to her, separating itself from the upholstery in a lazy stretch before turning to peer out the window as well.

It was the girl's damned cat, Stivac fumed. Her damned, worthless cat. Suddenly its small, neat head rocked from side to side and stopped. Even at a distance he could see the tension that animated its normally supine body. It had seen him where the girl couldn't.

The cat's actions did not go unnoticed by the girl, who returned her full attention to the window in an attempt to see what kitty was privy to. Unwilling to subject himself to their scrutiny, Stivac lurched forward, stamping up the gentle slope towards the French doors that overlooked his patio, his face a study in angry dignity. After only a few paces, the ground beneath his feet grew lumpy and soft, sinking beneath his weight and causing him to sidestep in alarm, arms flailing for balance. The mole had been extremely busy since his accident.

In a comical, high-stepping dance he reached the terra firma of his bricked terrace and spun about, face contorted with impotent rage, cane thrust out over the treacherous catacombs like a biblical prophet preparing to call down God's wrath. But the little girl having been called to the table, only the cat bore witness, its sharp ears exclamation marks of bemused interest.

Stivac slowly lowered the cane, feeling foolish under the animal's steady gaze, the pain in his knee throbbing dully, unsure of what he had been about to say in any case.

"Damn that sorry beast," he muttered, turning to go inside. "Why can't you kill the mole instead of messing in my flower beds and killing all the songbirds, you fat bastard?"

The cat remained unmoved at his post. Stivac slammed the door behind him.

Later that night, while drinking scotch and watching a nature program on television, he became inspired. The show had been a documentary on the garden variety of small predators. Killers that went about their deadly pursuits right under the noses of suburban homeowners. Shrews, shrikes, king snakes, and . . . weasels. These last having riveted his attention with their tireless

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search-and-destroy missions in the heart of the rodent kingdom; sleek, playful, tunnel warriors that relished snapping the necks of their prey and chattering excitedly over the kill.

This seemed to him the perfect solution. Ecologically sound, he mused. Certainly the poison he had so carefully ladled into the burrows had produced no results; in fact, it seemed the opposite had occurred. The mole, or moles, had become more active of late, networking his once-perfect lawn in a determined campaign. What he needed was a champion! He resolved to visit the local pet store first thing in the morning.

As he snuggled the blankets up to his chin in the darkened house, he thought, as he often did, of his late wife. Though she had died only six months before, he had trouble recalling her face, seeing instead a wavering pallid image that faded more quickly the harder he tried to remember it. He secretly believed her quiet death the logical conclusion to months of withdrawal from him, a willful act. Oddly, his memories of her as a young woman remained sharp and vivid.

It seemed to have begun with his retirement, or shortly before, with the announcement of the buyout. The company, with its hundred-odd employees, had been losing money for some time and he, as its executive officer, had taken action.

In his own estimation, it had been the greatest challenge of his career. It had been no easy task convincing the savvy young Turks of the competition that his company was well worth the investment, that left alone it held the potential to rise up and challenge its younger competitors.

And being much like himself, in spite of the age differences, they had correctly divined his motives. Here was an old warrior willing to remove himself from the fray, given the proper severance and retirement package, of course, and allow his competitors the keys to the castle.

It all went surprisingly smoothly. Stivac and his partners were well bought out and the company reduced to a distribution center requiring the services of ten employees, the remaining ninety or so becoming redundant. It was the impact of the layoffs on a small community that Stivac had underestimated.

Hints of it began at his golf club, innuendoes and sometimes openly snide remarks regarding the feathering of his nest at the community's expense. It seemed everyone had a friend or relative

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that had been layed off. He began to have difficulty finding partners.

At home, he complained bitterly of how quickly his former associates in the business community put him aside now that he was retired and of no further service to them, conveniently leaving out the gist of their remarks. Helen continued with her knitting, offering no comment.

Eventually, Stivac ceased playing golf and put the clubs away, commenting that he wanted to spend more time at home with his wife.

It was two months later that it occurred to Stivac that his wife had stopped attending her monthly bridge club meetings on Tuesdays. When asked for a reason, she grew evasive. Several weeks later, after he pressed her on the subject, she questioned him in return, ever so tentatively, about his handling of the buyout. He knew then the reason.

He patiently pointed out that ten people had retained their jobs under his plan. "What if we had just opted to shut down?" he had asked. "Has anybody thought of that? I did my best for everybody concerned." He lied.

For a long moment Helen didn't answer, but continued to stare out the kitchen window as she rinsed a glass. Finally, she spoke. "All those people's jobs, Larry, their families. Was a few thousand more a year worth it? Really?"

He was thunderstruck! He had never heard Helen voice an objection to his business dealings before. Of course, nothing he had done in the past had ever come home to roost in quite this manner.

"It was business, Helen," he thundered. "That's what I was paid for. To make the decisions that made the company money. You've never objected to spending it, by God!"

"Perhaps, if you had told me what you were doing?" she offered quietly.

He stormed out of the room and up the stairs.

It was from that day, Stivac thought, that she began to fade. With the leaving of the bridge club, she allowed all of her social contacts to wither, rarely accepting an invitation. In time the invitations stopped coming, the phone hung mute upon the wall. Whenever Stivac thought of his wife during this period, it was on her hands and knees, toiling quietly in her flower beds. It seemed as if the color and vibrancy she infused her garden with drained her own, and she grew old before his eyes.

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The funeral had been well attended. All of her old friends, including the bridge club, had shown up, and even to Stivac's cynical eye, their grief appeared genuine. Clearly her severance from them had been at her own instigation, a form of penance for his actions.

The kids had flown and driven in also, accompanied by their various wives, husbands, and children. They had all taken his stoicism as a form of shock and treated him gingerly, as if he might wake up and shatter with the realization of his wife's passing. He did not enlighten them as to his true feelings. In fact, he was relieved that Helen was gone, her silent rebuke lifted from his shoulders.

The following morning he rose early, in spite of a slight hangover from the scotch of the previous evening, and arrived at the pet store just as they were opening, the first customer of the day. A skinny youth with a pizza complexion manned the counter, steadfastly ignoring Stivac as he searched the cages for a weasel.

Puppies leapt at him as he approached, yipping with enthusiasm. Kittens licked and preened themselves, unconcerned with his attentions. Birds of every description screamed and chattered, drawing his incipient headache forth as a sharp pain behind his eyes. At last, he was forced to ask the boy for assistance.

"No," the boy assured him, "we do not stock weasels." And added rather archly, "There's not much call for them."

Stivac noted the patronizing smile tugging at the corners of the boy's mouth, and hated him for it.

"However," he went on importantly, "we have something much better."

The boy paused, waiting, and Stivac was forced to ask, "And what would that be?"

Having received the proper cue, he supplied the answer with a flourish. "A ferret."

"And what's that, when it's at home?" Stivac responded, trying to gain the upper hand.

The young clerk simply walked away to the back of the store without answering, leaving Stivac to follow grudgingly in his wake.

With a flourish he whipped the tarp off a large cage in the storeroom. Startled, the ferret reared up on its hind legs, chattering angrily, its tiny black eyes sparkling with malice. Stivac took an involuntary step backwards, much to the boy's amusement.

"Looks like a weasel," Stivac offered weakly, drawing closer again in spite of himself.

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"Yeah, but it's not. It belongs to the weasel family, that's why they look alike. But it's a European ferret; they're tamable. This one here is domesticated."

"Coulda' fooled me," Stivac said, drawing closer yet, fascinated by the sleek beauty and fierceness of the creature. "What's that smell?"

"All ferrets got a little smell to 'em," the boy answered defensively. "His musk glands have been removed, though."

"Can he be handled?" Stivac asked doubtfully.

"Oh sure," the boy answered, opening the cage and sticking his arm in. The ferret, after a moment's hesitation, climbed up to his shoulder and perched, whiskers twitching with playfulness, its narrow head swiveling this way and that with curiosity. It hardly seemed the same animal they had disturbed only moments before.

Suddenly unsure, Stivac asked, "Will he hunt?"

"Hunt?" the boy repeated stupidly.

"Yes," Stivac continued weakly. "Like a weasel. . . . Rodents and such?"

"Oh! Hunt! Yeah, he'll hunt. If you got rats and such." Here he looked at Stivac with barely concealed distaste. "Yeah, he'll run 'em down."

"And moles?" Stivac asked.

"Moles," the boy repeated again, seeming to give it some thought. "Are they rodents? Yeah, he'll nail them too."

Stivac drove home with the cage in the backseat covered by the tarp, to keep the creature calm during the ride. The stink emanating from the cage, previously masked somewhat by the many odors of the pet shop, blossomed inside the vehicle and Stivac had to complete the drive with the windows down, in spite of the cold.

That afternoon, he took the ferret for a stroll in the backyard to acquaint it with the mole. He accomplished this with a leash he had bought for this purpose. In spite of the shop clerk's assurances, he wore leather driving gloves when handling the beast, remembering its rows of bared needlelike teeth.

It seemed delighted to be out of its cage and gamboled and scurried about the yard on its short legs, only occasionally showing its displeasure at being tethered by turning to snap at the restraint. The ferret tugged and pulled him along with surprising strength in an animal not much larger than a squirrel. Its curiosity seemed endless as it nosed its way around flowerpots and lawn furniture, several times hopelessly entangling itself. At last, having investigated every plant in Helen's withering flower beds, the ferret awk-

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wardly pulled itself up onto a wooden lawn chair, curled up like a cat, and went to sleep in a small patch of sun.

Stivac did not fail to notice that the animal had not once investigated any of the mole runs that crisscrossed his yard in ever-increasing proliferation. In fact, he noted with exasperation, several new ones had appeared just since his outing last night.

With a jerk, he snatched the ferret from its slumbers, dragging it from the chair at the end of the leash. The ferret responded with angry chatter, dancing on its hind legs in an attempt to seize the lead. Its razor teeth clicked in fury.

Reaching a nexus of tunnels, Stivac stopped, waiting for the animal to calm and scent its prey. After a few moments it stopped dancing and began to circle the disrupted earth, its short snout close to the ground. Stivac held his breath, his heart beginning to race.

Suddenly, the ferret cocked its head in an inquisitive manner, as if it were listening to movement beneath its paws, then began to dig furiously in the soft soil, thrusting its face into the hole it had opened. Its whole body quivered in excitement. Stivac watched in anticipation of the moment his small hunter would withdraw its head from the tunnel, its prey clamped between its ruthless jaws.

The tiny sleek head withdrew, dirt clinging to its pink nose, mouth empty, and darted forth, quickly digging another hole in the run, flinging dirt this way and that. Again it came up with nothing. Again and again it repeated these actions, leaving holes the size of a man's fist throughout the yard. At last, weary of its exertions, it curled up on a mound of dirt it had unearthed and went to sleep.

Quaking with anger and frustration, Stivac snatched up a clay flowerpot, heavy with potting soil, and for a moment held it aloft over the dozing predator. The expense of the beast made him hesitate. Instead, he set it down and managed to tether the leash to it. The ferret would remain anchored to the spot, he decided, until it did what he had bought it for. In time, he reckoned, it would become hungry enough to do what nature intended. With that, he stalked away, leaving the ferret to doze in the afternoon sun on his ruined lawn.

The following morning, the ferret was gone. Stivac rushed from his house, having glimpsed the overturned flowerpot lying on his

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lawn. It seemed impossible to Stivac that such a small creature could have accomplished this.

Upset over money thrown away, he prowled the yard for some sign of the ferret's whereabouts. Somewhat guiltily, he wondered whether a domesticated ferret could survive in the wild, especially with a leash dangling from its neck.

As he approached the stand of trees that separated his property from his neighbors', he spotted the little girl's cat. It was the patches of snow-white fur that gave it away as it rested on a bed of pine needles, delicate feet drawn beneath its flabby bulk, a look of half-dozing contentment on its face. It appeared to be focused on something just out of Stivac's view.

An alarm went off in Stivac's head, and using his cane to push aside the underbrush, he forced his way to the spot. The large cat glanced lazily in his direction and then returned its attention to whatever lay before it.

Stivac stepped into the small clearing and at once saw the leash, which ran like an exclamation mark from the cat to the ferret. The ferret lay stiff and mangled, stretched to its full length, its tiny killer's mouth frozen in a silent snarl. All about the head were numerous punctures circled with red fur that had stiffened into spikes. With supreme indifference, the cat extracted a paw from beneath its warm stomach and began to carefully cleanse it with a sharp, pointed tongue.

Stivac raised the cane above his head to crack its neat skull, but the cat was quicker. It leapt to all fours faster than Stivac thought possible for such an overweight animal, even taking a moment to bare its fangs and hiss before streaking through the brush in the direction of its home. Stivac's cane struck nothing but the warm bed of pine needles the cat had vacated.

Staggering after it, his left knee on fire, he flailed away at the undergrowth, panting with exertion, determined to kill the murderous thing. Stivac crashed through the final obstructing branches and emerged sweating and red-faced into his neighbors' backyard. The cat crouched nervously at the steps leading to the back door, its tail twitching in anger. Knowing it would spring away before he could reach it, he hurled the walking stick like a javelin.

Again the cat was quicker; it flashed up the steps and through the opening door before his cane clattered against the railing several feet from where it had crouched. The little girl stared from

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the doorway in disbelief, her face, like the cat's, a mixture of fear and fury.

Feeling the color drain from his face, Stivac gasped out, "Your cat, he . . ."

But like her cat, the girl was quicker. "You better get out of here!" she demanded.

"It was your cat . . ." Stivac began, feeling his sense of outrage slip away under the girl's scrutiny. For a fleeting moment, he saw himself as she must, a frightening old man whose behavior was dangerous, inexplicable.

"If you don't leave my cat alone, I'm gonna tell my dad," she pronounced with the assurance and certitude of the very young.

Stivac's sense of outrage and injustice returned like an infusion of hot blood, coloring his cheeks and straightening his spine; even his leg ceased hurting. "Well, by God, little girl, you do that! I've got a few things to say to him about that cat of yours. He just killed my ferret! Did you know that?"

For the first time, the girl's face creased in worry and she glanced hastily over her shoulder into the house. "A farrot?" she repeated uncertainly. "No," she decided, "Mickey wouldn't do that," and began to close the door.

Stivac felt as if the pressure in his head would explode his skull. "Yes, he did!" he almost screamed. "I caught him at it! You better keep him out of my yard! I'm tired of finding his shit in my garden!"

With that, the little girl's face became closed and certain. "You better stop cursing . . . or I'll tell." She closed the door in his face and locked it.

For a moment Stivac stood rooted to the spot, visions of rushing up the steps, breaking the door down, and thrashing the girl playing vividly in his brain. Then, oddly, the girl's admonition about his foul language drained his confidence, leaving him feeling ridiculous and immature, a caricature of the self-assured businessman he had been only months before.

Stivac limped over to his cane, the pain in his knee having returned four-fold, and retrieved it from the steps. Without looking back, he hobbled across the intervening lawns to his own house, a tapeworm of desire for vengeance over his loss and humiliation at the hands of the girl feeding at his guts.

Three days later, the little girl found Mickey dead. Like Stivac, she discovered her pet partially hidden by the undergrowth at the

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border of her parents' property. She had been searching for him each day after school, going house to house to inquire whether anyone had seen or taken in her large and notorious cat. She had ignored Stivac's home, confident that Mickey was far too smart to have returned there.

She had not revealed her confrontation with Mr. Stivac to her parents. Having buried numerous victims of Mickey's depredations, she knew that he was capable of killing "farrots" too, if they were small enough, and so chose silence in regard to Mickey's affairs.

It was while dressing for school that she spotted the patches of black and white from her second-floor bedroom window. Rushing excitedly downstairs and out the back door, she called Mickey's name, certain that he was waiting patiently for the family to be up and about to let him in.

When he did not respond to her calls she pushed her way in to him, getting her dress and shoes wet with dew from the low branches and saplings. Mickey awaited her, fangs bared in the painful rictus of his last excruciating moments, his large, loose belly distended hideously by the poison he had ingested. His green eyes, so often squeezed into contented slits at her gentle strokings, bulged from his head, sheathed in a white milky film.

Crying loudly for her loss, she lifted her companion into her arms, his wet fur further staining her dress, and marched slowly towards her house, her grief dramatic and sincere.

Stivac observed the proceedings from his own bedroom window, having been drawn there by the child's wailing. Seeing her burden, he could hardly suppress a whoop of joy. There, by God, he thought. There! That's justice for you! Maybe now the little brat will understand something about loss!

As if she had heard his thoughts, the little girl stopped and glared at his window. Stivac sank back into the shadows.

The weather warmed unseasonably on Saturday, the sky clearing with the morning's sun and revealing a firmament of deep, promising blue. Stivac, his knee feeling much better and wrapped tightly with the elastic bandage the doctor had given him, resolved to stroll the neighborhood, the first real exercise he'd had since the accident.

Reaching the street, he could see that his neighbors were feeling much as he, liberated and energetic. Cars were being washed and lawns raked. Children on dusty bicycles were hurtling along the

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blacktop of the street. Stivac felt the lethargy and depression of the past few days lift from his shoulders; his breathing felt easier.

He waved at the young father across the street soaping his car. With the briefest of glances, the man turned and seized the hose lying at his feet and began to rinse the vehicle, casually turning his back to Stivac. Puzzled, Stivac walked on, trying to remember if he normally wore glasses.

On the next block, a large twelve-year-old boy, with shaggy hair that hung into his eyes, straddled his bicycle at the far corner and closely observed Stivac's approach, his face unreadable in the distance.

As Stivac neared, the boy stood on his pedals and raced down the walk directly in line with Stivac's approach. Nervously, Stivac edged to the right, unwilling to give up his claim to the sidewalk completely. The boy adjusted accordingly, keeping Stivac framed between the handlebars. Without thinking, Stivac raised his cane in reaction to the imminent collision, his mouth working wordlessly in an attempt to frame the necessary commands.

With the skill of long practice, the boy skidded to a stop, slewing his bicycle sideways across Stivac's path, blocking his progress. He sat back confidently beneath the hovering cane, calmly assessing Stivac through a curtain of dirty hair. Stivac stared back, speechless.

Moments ticked by as he attempted to affect some semblance of outrage to cover the fear the boy inspired. Unconsciously, he lowered the cane. The boy smirked, sure of his man.

"Meow," he drawled, studying Stivac's face for a reaction.

Dry-mouthed, all Stivac could think to say was, "What? What did you say?"

Satisfied, the boy gave him a shark's smile of young, white teeth and pedaled leisurely away, not even bothering to glance back to see if Stivac were pursuing him.

Stivac watched as the boy disappeared around the corner. The day seemed to grow darker suddenly, as if a single cloud had crept out to smother the sun.

Behind him, a voice said, "That little creep bothering you?"

Stivac spun around unsteadily, frightened. "What?" he almost cried out.

It was his neighbor two houses away, the one with the obnoxious barking dog that was now straining at its leash to inspect Stivac.

"That punk say something to upset you?" the neighbor persisted.

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"Uh, no," Stivac lied, though he didn't know why.

"Caught him teasing Caesar, here, once," he announced portentously. "Woulda' thrashed his little butt, if I coulda' caught 'im." His unshaven jowls quivered at the memory of such an outrage.

Stivac couldn't imagine the man catching anyone, with his great belly and beer-sodden reactions. In fact, Stivac had often wondered how he had come to live in such a neighborhood at all. All he seemed to do was hunt and fish, Stivac thought with a sneer.

As if reading his mind, the fat man glanced down at the large retriever with pride. "This here is a prize hunter, you know. Valuable."

Stivac did not know, and as the dog's owner relaxed his grip in contentment it bolted forward, leaping onto Stivac's chest with its great front paws. Stivac began to stagger back, arms wheeling. With amazing celerity for his bulk, the fat man's hamlike arm shot forth and seized Stivac's, in the same moment reining the dog back so that its tongue shot out and it danced on its toes.

In those moments, the dog's face had been inches from Stivac's, and even in his panic he had noticed the numerous cuts and tears in its broad muzzle. Some were crusted with dried blood, others remained open, exposing the pink meat within.

Something squirmed towards the surface of Stivac's brain.

Recovering himself, outrage momentarily forgotten, he burst out, "What happened to your dog?" pointing at its snout for emphasis. The dog growled deeply, contemplating his finger.

Unfazed, the fat man answered as if nothing had happened. "That fat cat next door! You know, the little girl's. Caesar jumped the pen the other night, seemed a little worked up over something, and that fat thing tore 'im up pretty good." He reached down and stroked the animal's head consolingly. "Didn't he, boy?" The dog stared up at his master with limpid, suffering eyes. "Don't know why Caesar didn't kill 'im, though. The little girl prob'ly chased him off."

With that, he snatched moodily at the dog's leash and resumed their walk.

"Won't happen again, though," he called over his shoulder, then stopped and half turned, a look of what might be concern, or embarrassment, on his bristly, melting face. "Hey, don't worry 'bout them rumors, they'll go away . . . in time." As an afterthought, he added, "I know you didn't poison the cat," and even winked a small, reddened eye.

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The words sounded faint and garbled in Stivac's ear as his mind wrestled with the image of the dog's wounds. They had not been the long tears of a feline slashing, but rather, dozens of small incisions arranged in rough ovals . . . not unlike the bite of a ferret fighting for its life, Stivac thought sickly.

He thought also of the neighbor's snub and the confrontation with the boy on the bicycle and felt the small cloud stretching into a great, incomprehensible eclipse.

The scotch fueled Stivac's indignation, causing him to pace throughout the house with an angry energy. Several times he found himself in rooms that had not been used since his children moved away years before.

He was surprised at the views framed in their dusty windows, perspectives that he had forgotten, or maybe never been aware of. The experience made him uneasy, as if he had accidentally wandered into someone else's house, and he retreated, closing the doors behind him.

At last, as dusk descended, he found himself in the day room, looking out the French doors at his neighbors' house. The little girl sat on the back steps staring at the wood line, as if waiting for her cat to return. The sight of her small mourning enraged Stivac, his simmering victim's anger boiling to the surface.

How dare she? he thought. How dare she spread rumors and besmirch my character? Didn't she know a man's reputation was all he had? His thoughts rambled boozily on, bolstering his growing sense of self-righteousness. What were her parents teaching her?

I'll have a talk with them, by God, he decided, snatching open the door and stepping unsteadily out. The little girl, startled at his sudden appearance, rose quickly, as if to flee indoors.

Stivac struck the bricks with the tip of his cane and set out across the patio, intending to march straight to the door she would surely take refuge behind, but instead found himself listing to the right, off course. He stopped, confused, and attempted to focus on his destination and regain his bearing.

The little girl had also stopped, staring hard at Stivac, her mouth open, her eyes wide with fear. Stivac felt his heart grow loud in his chest, hammering an unfamiliar rhythm.

I am the victim, he reassured himself. She'll have to be made to understand that. No animal is worth a man's standing in the community! I've been tried and convicted without a shred of evidence!

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He set out again, having trouble maintaining his balance as he reached the mushy lawn. Damn these moles, he whined inwardly, feeling as if every obstacle were being placed in his way.

The cane shot out to steady him and sank six inches beneath the soil. Stivac, teetering dangerously, pushed away from the stick, back-wheeling until his foot found one of the many unfilled holes left by the ferret. It fit snugly to the ankle and he felt something snap. He struck the hollowed earth with a great thump and lay quite still, a blinding, savage pain rendering him mute. His blood rushed, roaring, into the lower regions of his body, leaving his head cold and deserted at the end of his thin neck.

He could still see the girl, rigid with alarm, one hand on the door handle now. Nearby, the cane stood erect, as if its owner had vanished mid stride from the planet.

Stivac tried to call to her to get help, but his ribs grated drily beneath his flesh and a band of metal began to constrict around his heart, smothering its odd beatings and robbing him of breath.

I didn't hurt your cat! Stivac pleaded wordlessly across the intervening lawns, and watched helplessly as she entered the house.

She reappeared just moments later, backlighted in the same window in which he had seen her and the cat—had it been just days before?

In the background, her mother crossed and recrossed the lighted stage, busy with the preparations for dinner. The little girl stood looking out at him, glancing nervously over her shoulder each time her mother entered the room. He saw her look to the curtains.

Don't! Stivac tried to scream across the gulf that separated him from the girl. It wasn't me!

Suddenly he recalled the fat man's parting words: "I know you didn't poison the cat."

Of course, Stivac concluded triumphantly. Of course! The one who did it would know, wouldn't he?

"It was the fat man," he shouted with all his might, remembering the red winking eye. "The fat man killed your cat!" But all that issued forth was a bubbly wheeze that frothed his lips with a tangy, mineral taste.

The girl pulled the curtains and the warm rectangle of light winked into gloom, leaving Stivac alone in the darkness. As his heartbeats slowed, he thought he heard the first faint scritchings of the mole burrowing its way to the surface beneath his ear.●

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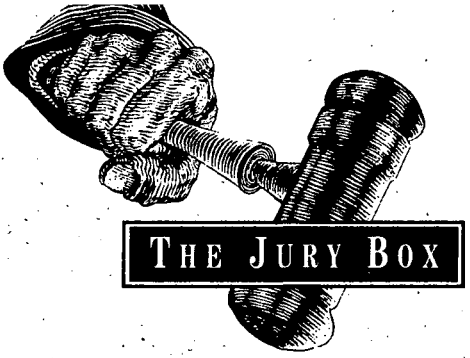

by Jon L. Breen

The musical world makes a good backdrop for fictional crime. Consider, for example, Gaston Leroux's *The Phantom of the Opera* (1911), Caryl Brahms and S. J. Simon's *A Bullet in the Ballet* (1937), or Robert Barnard's *Death on the High C's* (1978). The latest theme anthology drawn from *EQMM and AHMM, Murder to Music* (Carroll & Graf, $22), edited by Cynthia Manson and Kathleen Halligan, includes musical mysteries by Agatha Christie, Cornell Woolrich, Lillian de la Torre, James Yaffe, Edward D. Hoch, John Lutz, and others. And two of the very best writers currently practicing, one relative newcomer and one prolific veteran, have new novels with musical connections.

**** Kate Ross: *The Devil in Music,* Viking, $23.95. Among novel-writing American trial lawyers, Ross is unique in recounting not present-day courtroom hijinks but the amateur sleuthing of a Restoration English dandy. In his fourth case, Julian Kestrel travels to 1825 Italy to look into the murder of a Milanese nobleman and opera patron whose last singing protégée, an English tenor known as Orfeo, seems the most likely suspect. But no one knows what the vanished Orfeo looked like, his singing teacher being blind. Ross demonstrates mastery of period, locale, character, and fair-play detection, producing one of the most daring stunt solutions in recent memory.

**** Ed McBain: *Nocturne,* Warner, $24. 87th Precinct cops Steve Carella and Cotton Hawes investigate the murder of Svetlana Dyalovich, an octogenarian former concert pianist—one of the suspects is her cabaret-singer granddaughter. Over forty years after launching the series with the paperback origi-

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nal *Cop Hater* (1956), McBain remains on top of the police procedural heap, the mix of neat plotting, sharp dialogue, and prose cityscapes as fresh as ever. (In one of McBain's characteristic self-indulgent running jokes, characters keep referring to Alfred Hitchcock writing *The Birds,* the script for which was actually written by Evan Hunter, i.e., McBain himself.)

*** Jill McGown: *Unsafe Verdict,* Fawcett Columbine, $22. When Colin Drummond's serial-rape conviction is reversed, Detective Inspector Judy Hill must try to capture him again while avoiding becoming his next victim. A solid British procedural. (Attention, collectors: in an assault on the authorial wrist, all copies of this not-that-limited first edition have been signed by McGown.)

*** Lawrence Block: *The Burglar in the Library,* Dutton, $22.95. Though Block's sense of humor is manifest in everything he writes, few of his books are as purely comic as those about burglar/book dealer/amateur detective Bernie Rhodenbarr. This time, the joke is on Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler: a copy of Chandler's *The Big Sleep* inscribed to Hammett becomes the mcguffin in a snowbound-house party mystery of the sort neither of the hardboiled masters would have been caught dead writing. (In a book rich in genre references, Block stumbles once: it is in "Silver Blaze," not *The Hound of the Baskervilles,* that a non- barking dog gives Sherlock Holmes the vital clue.)

*** Lawrence Block: *Even the Wicked,* Morrow, $23. A letter-writing serial killer who calls himself the Will of the People (Will for short) delights more than terrorizes New York by taking out the most hated members of society. In a whydunit that may or may not be related, a terminal AIDS patient is gunned down in Greenwich Village. Though this is not among the best of the great Matt Scudder series—many readers will surely catch on to a major plot twist exactly 65 pages before Scudder drops his bombshell—the combination of clever ideas, good talk, and real detective work remains potent.

*** Michael Kurland: *Too Soon Dead,* St. Martin's, $22.95. How many writers have tried to recapture the flavor of Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe saga? Apart from Robert Goldsborough's official Wolfe pastiches, there were Rufus King's Cotton Moon (in the 1940 one-shot *Holiday Homicide),* Thomas B. Dewey's Singer Batts, Marvin Kaye's Hilary Quayle, Lawrence Block's Leo Haig, Monica Quill's (Ralph

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McInerny's) Sister Mary Teresa, William L. DeAndrea's Lobo Blacke, and Melodie Johnson Howe's Claire Conrad, among others. One of the most successful attempts is this first book about New York columnist Alexander Brass, of Wolfean intellect and idiosyncracies though much thinner and more active, and his would-be-novelist chronicler Morgan DeWitt, whose efforts to write like Archie Goodwin are mostly on the money. The puzzle (again in the Wolfe tradition) is kind of slight, but the background of New York in 1935 is splendid, with the exception of one screaming anachronism *somebody* in the publishing process should have caught: the word *shrink* as slang for psychiatrist. *** Margaret Maron: *Shoveling Smoke,* Crippen & Landru, P.O. Box 9315, Norfolk, VA 23505-9315; $16 trade paper; $40 signed, limited hardcover. These 22 short stories range in date from 1968 to the present, in type from Hitchcockian domestic twisters to tales of pure detection. Two concern New York cop Sigrid Harald and four, including one original, North Carolina Judge Deborah Knott. Another of the Knotts is a collaboration with Susan Dunlap, whose Kieran O'Shaughnessy also appears. I especially liked "Hangnail," a virtuoso dying message riff in homage to Ellery Queen.

Fans of both mystery and science fiction should look for two recent paperbacks: *Sci-Fi Private Eye* (ROC, $5.99), edited by Charles G. Waugh and Martin H. Greenberg, begins with Isaac Asimov's "The Singing Bell," about futuristic armchair detective Wendell Urth, and ends with Larry Niven's "ARM," a short novel about a more action-oriented s.f. sleuth, Gil Hamilton, with Poul Anderson, Donald E. Westlake, and Robert Silverberg among those represented in-between; Sharyn McCrumb contributes a new introduction to the reprint of her satiric *Bimbos of the Death Sun* (Ballantine, $5.99), winner of the Edgar for best paperback original of 1987 and probably the best s.f. convention whodunit.

Also among the reprints is the only Edgar nominee for best novel of 1996 not previously noted here: Laurie R. King's expertly written and deeply involving *With Child* (Bantam, $5.99), third in the series about San Francisco cop Kate Martinelli.

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Art by Shirley Chan

Crack in a Crystal Ball

by William Link

Mrs. Alexa Simbro had waited nine days now for her daughter's return and her anxiety threshold was reaching the danger point. Robin, fifteen years old and a lovely mirror-image of her mother, had gone to school one morning and was not seen again. The Beverly Hills police had determined that she had attended all her classes that day (Robin was an A student) and had sung in the glee-club chorus with friends after school, but no one had seen her since.

Mrs. Simbro paced the tall, empty rooms of her faux-Tudor house at the corner of Lomitas and Maple, drinking glass after glass of Earl Grey tea to quell the dull hangover headache behind her eyes. It was a wealthy neighborhood, lots of people in the en-

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tertainment industry (Diana Ross lived around the corner) and there were always long dark stretch limos in the morning, shuttling stars and execs to the airport. There had been burglaries, including one persistent second-story man who was still at large, but never a kidnapping. That's why the police were baffled: no evidence of foul play and as yet no ransom note. But almost every night Mrs. Simbro had awakened with the same nightmare: Robin's broken body lying in a dried-up culvert of the Los Angeles river.

TV writer-producer William Link has to his credit more than fifteen successful TV series, including *Murder She Wrote*, *Mannix*, and *Columbo*. In his feature films for TV, he has often touched on serious, groundbreaking subjects such as race. In this new story, he focuses on the mother of a missing teen and the lengths to which she'll go. ¶

Mrs. Simbro shuddered again with the image. She glanced at the grandfather clock in the foyer: eleven already. She was surprised that her ex, George, had not come over to annoy her with questions. He had flown in from Chicago, leaving his telemarketing firm in the lurch as soon as he had heard that Robin had vanished. Mrs. Simbro didn't allow him to stay in the house, which was perfectly fine with George. He was holed up in a luxury suite at the Four Seasons, five minutes away. She couldn't stomach him anymore—always immaculately attired with a dew-fresh rosebud in his lapel, moving gracefully in a haze of aftershave, but in her growing fear and frustration he was still someone to comfort her.

Marta came in with a fresh glass of tea, almost as if they were attached telepathically. She was petite and pretty, sweetly withdrawn with a peekaboo wing of raven hair. Once a year she spent her vacation visiting her family in Guatemala City.

"Thank you, Marta."

"Lunch, missus?"

"Not today, no, I have a terrible headache."

"Nothing at all?"

She shook her head firmly. She could hear the pool man outside, hosing down the tile apron of the jacuzzi. Another Guatemalan she sometimes caught contemplating Marta like a grinning testosterone monkey.

She sipped her tea, aware that Marta was still standing there.

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Her large, lovely eyes were downcast, staring at her shoes.

"Marta? Is there something you wish to ask me?"

The young woman was embarrassed. "Y-Yes. Yes, I was wondering, missus . . ."

"Wondering what?" Get it out, woman. My patience these days is sorely tried.

"I have a friend. She—she can tell you things about yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"She can tell you things about yourself that no one else knows."

"You mean she's what they call a psychic?"

"Yes! I was thinking—maybe she can help you."

"About—about Robin?"

Marta nodded, exhibiting one of her rare smiles. Now Mrs. Simbro could hear Frances, her daughter's little dog, barking furiously, probably attacking her sworn enemy, the pool man.

"But don't people like your friend—and I don't mean to be insulting, Marta—but don't they deal in trivial things like trips, romance, good fortune?"

"Oh no. She is very serious! Once the police even came to her."

"She was in trouble?"

Marta laughed. Her teeth were impossibly white, like in a television commercial. "Nothing like that, missus. She is a good church lady. The police wanted her help."

Mrs. Simbro flushed; it was doubly embarrassing to be corrected by a servant. "Oh. Yes. I see." Now she remembered something she had once seen on the news, an old crone in Brooklyn or somewhere who had given the police some tips on a serial killer. If her memory served, the information had been valuable and they eventually caught the man.

"I told her about Miss Robin and she was very interested."

Mrs. Simbro frowned, still smarting from her display of ignorance. "Haven't I warned you a dozen times, Marta, you mustn't tell our business to strangers?"

"Oh no, missus, Terasita is not a stranger. I have known her since I first came to this country."

A technicality, but Mrs. Simbro let it pass. She thought about it. She had never believed in fortunetellers or Tarot cards or any of those New Age people that California seemed to breed like oranges. She could never fathom why her best friend Leonore relied on a practically illiterate housewife psychic in the Valley to predict the bond market and her husband's questionable fidelity.

"Where does your friend live?" she asked on an impulse.

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"A few doors down from me. No more than a half-hour drive from here, missus."

She thought some more: Under normal circumstances she would not have been caught dead even entertaining this absurd proposition. But it was the ninth day that frightful image of her daughter lying in the culvert flashed like heat lightning in her mind's eye.

"Marta," she said, again on impulse, "maybe I'll try your friend—Terasita, you called her? She'll want money, won't she?"

Marta lowered her eyes. "Just a small gift. It would be up to you."

There was a pathetic scratching sound on the patio door, and the two women instantly recognized the familiar signal. Marta went to open the sliding door.

Frances came cannonballing into the foyer, skidding on the highly polished parquet floor. It was a tiny Yorkshire terrier, a cotton-candy puff of black and orange fur with glittering eyes. She ran directly to Mrs. Simbro, who bent to scoop her up.

"You naughty dog," she admonished. "You're all wet again. Sometimes I think Carlos douses you on purpose!"

Even in the midst of her despair she felt that one of the few things that sustained her was her unconditional love for this little creature. In fact (and she almost colored with shame) she loved it at times more than Robin, especially when the teenager exploded at her with spasms of rage and contrariness.

Later, as her headache receded, she decided she would have a bite of lunch. Marta microwaved a frozen brick of lentil soup and served Mrs. Simbro in the long formal dining room. Robin's place mat and dinnerware were still laid out on the table and Mrs. Simbro averted her eyes. Marta was again hanging around with nothing to do, staring down at the floor.

Annoyed: "What is it now, Marta?"

"I forgot to tell you, missus—when we visit Terasita—you must bring something along."

"Bring what?"

"Something—something of Miss Robin's. A schoolbook, a comb, something *personal,* missus."

Mrs. Simbro looked down at Frances, who was sitting at her legs with a baleful, almost imploring expression. She did this frequently even though Mrs. Simbro adhered to the rule *No food from the table.*

"What about Frances?" Mrs. Simbro asked, more to herself than to Marta.

"Frances?"

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"Yes. Robin loved—loves Frances. We bought her for her when she was just a little girl and it was love at first sight. I can't think of anything more personal."

Marta seemed hesitant. "But Terasita did not mention anything—like an animal."

"Then I would suggest you ask your friend. If it's inappropriate we'll find something else to bring."

After lunch Mrs. Simbro called Lieutenant Pomeroy, who was her Missing Persons contact at the police station. She was told he was out on a case but would be checking in. Mrs. Simbro clung to this piece of information like a drowning person to a buoy: Maybe there was a breakthrough on her daughter's disappearance.

When she replaced the phone she saw Marta standing like a supplicant under the living room arch.

"It is fine with Terasita, missus. She thinks the dog is a very good idea."

Mrs. Simbro felt rejuvenated for the first time that day. "Well, let's not waste any time. Will she be home this afternoon?"

"Yes, ma'am. That's what she said."

As Mrs. Simbro was backing the car down the drive, Frances began barking. She looked in the rearview mirror and saw George's 450SL Mercedes rental sliding along the curb in front of the house. George himself bounded out and came striding briskly over to them. He was gorgeously attired, as usual, in a cream summer suit with his signature rose in the lapel. He was still a handsome, sandy-haired gentleman, his sparkling bonhomie hiding a ruthless business acumen.

"Got held up in the suite—conference calls."

Mrs. Simbro shrugged. She kept the motor running, letting him see her bridling impatience.

"Any word from Lieutenant Pomeroy today?"

"No."

He looked smilingly at Marta and the dog. "Where are we all going?"

"*We*," Mrs. Simbro said, "are going shopping. I'm really in a hurry, George."

Without another word or gesture she left him standing awkwardly on the pavement, the huge house looming behind him, the house he had reluctantly relinquished to her in the divorce settlement. He had stranded her, now she was stranding him. Let him go back to the hotel, play the powerful CEO, pick up

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some promiscuous secretary or hooker in the cocktail lounge.

When she saw the bodegas and the record stores spewing salsa music into the street, she knew she had crossed an invisible line and entered Marta's world. The world had changed from white to a suspicious brown, but it seemed deceptively cheerful and at peace in the smoggy sunlight: moms picking produce in open-air mercados with pudgy bubbling babies in woven holsters, lowriders covered with garish graffiti like a second skin.

Terasita's little one-story house had its grass neatly trimmed and there were geraniums in the listing window boxes. It looked somewhat like the drawings in children's books, the inviting gingerbread house where the fairy godmother lives—the godmother with the secret powders and potions. But in reality it was a slightly shabby, mongrelized version of the classic California bungalow.

Terasita herself let them in. She was a tiny, swarthy woman, all in black, devoid of any makeup or accessories. She had hooded onyx eyes and an inky moustache over sensuous lips; she was no more than forty.

Mrs. Simbro felt vaguely uncomfortable in these strange surroundings: old claw-footed furniture, more Germanic than Latino; hand-crocheted antimacassars on the dark droopy sofa. The house smelled like a litter box but there were no animals visible or heard and she was amazed that Frances, on her leash, was perfectly quiet.

"And what is the little fella's name?" Terasita asked in a surprisingly modulated voice.

You're supposed to be the psychic, Mrs. Simbro thought. "Frances."

"Ah. A little girl." She gestured Mrs. Simbro to sit in an ancient rocking chair, lowering herself onto a flotilla of cushions facing her. Marta, looking on like an expectant acolyte, hung back in the shadows.

"Tell me about your daughter, Mrs. Simbro."

The other woman sighed. Wasn't it supposed to be the other way around, the psychic divulges fragments of information in lightning flashes of intuition. "I—I don't know where to begin."

"Yes. I realize this is difficult for you, but . . .".

"She's fifteen years old. Here—" She handed the woman a small snapshot of Robin that was taken at her last birthday party.

Terasita studied it, her dark-skinned face impassive. "Pretty. Born in March, eh? This was her fifteenth birthday party."

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Mrs. Simbro was startled. "Yes! How did you—?"

"A winter child. She has the Pisces aura."

Mrs. Simbro stared at her: an uneducated woman, hardly assimilated, living a very limited existence. And yet—and yet she probably knew things more socially accepted people did not. But why wasn't she out exploiting her talent like the others on the psychic network and the talk shows? Why was she buried in this lower-middle-class ghetto like a spider in its web?

"Your daughter is a very troubled child," Terasita went on. "Am I right—she has had emotional . . . difficulties? She visits a psychiatrist twice a week?"

"Well . . . after my husband and I divorced, she changed . . . she became *different*. She didn't want to confide in me any longer."

"Yes. She lives with anger. She screams at you, she has temper tantrums."

"Sometimes, yes." Oh God, she thought, she hadn't bargained for this: It was like being back in analysis herself, hanging out a clothesline of filthy family secrets, dirty laundry for all the neighbors to see.

"I feel a wall. I feel you are gathering your defenses. This is not good for either of us."

Now the lecture from this little . . . this little nonentity. "I'm . . . I'm sorry. You must understand I am a very private person."

"I do understand, Mrs. Simbro. But you are also a very prideful person and you are forgetting why you are here with my friend."

Control yourself; you mustn't let her see your disrespect, your contempt. "I know exactly why I'm here."

Terasita extended her arm and scooped up the little Yorkie. She held it cradled like a baby in her arms and it was marvelously docile, perhaps intimidated. It made a strangled, lamblike mewing.

"This was your daughter's pet. She loved this dog; I can feel waves of love."

Mrs. Simbro nodded. She felt trapped now, hemmed in by the maze of old furniture, the woman's mesmeric stare, the eyes set deep in their sockets like glowing coals in a stove.

"I see your daughter with a man . . ."

"Then she's alive!" Mrs. Simbro exclaimed.

"Yes. She is alive."

"Who is the man?"

Terasita stroked the dog. "I see him in a shadow—a very dark shadow. His face is shrouded. I smell . . ." She closed her eyes for an instant, her nostrils twitching. "A garden. No—a single flower."

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Mrs. Simbro felt her heart muscle contracting, her pulse racing. She fearfully anticipated the woman's next words.

"A rose. A man with a rose." She sank back into the mound of cushions like an exhausted swimmer melting into the water. "That's all I can tell you about him for the moment." Frances sprang loose from her limp fingers.

Mrs. Simbro's eyes caught Marta's; they were both fixated on the same thing. She fumbled in her handbag, the atmosphere in the room beginning to choke her, the kitty litter smell as strong as ammonia now. "I want to give you a little gift," she said. "A token of my appreciation."

Terasita waved the money away. "No, no, I cannot take anything. I can sense that you are very disturbed and I did not want to hurt you, but I know you wanted the truth."

Mrs. Simbro rose shakily to her feet, the rocking chair still rocking as if she had left her ghost there. "We'll be going now. We've taken up enough of your time already. And thank you again."

The eyes easily pierced her protective facade, hard as anthracite. "You know the man."

Mrs. Simbro stumbled, pushed her way like a blind person past the clutter of furniture toward the door.

Safely back in her home, Mrs. Simbro noted with relief that it was five o'clock, when she could have her first drink of the day. She had taught Marta how to make a perfectly chilled martini: Bombay gin, no ice, a single pitless olive.

She finished the first one in a few quick swallows and signaled Marta to pour another from the pitcher.

She had been silent with her housekeeper in the car coming home in the slowly thickening business traffic. She felt totally depleted, as if she had lived through another Los Angeles earthquake. But now the deep cracks and fissures were not in the dining room walls but in the very texture of her life.

Drinking (or gulping down) the second martini, she called Lt. Pomeroy to find that he was still out. Relieved, she replaced the receiver, almost dropping it; she was glad she didn't have to tell him about the strange psychic woman's premonition, knowing he would mentally classify her as just another Beverly Hills hysteric.

But the facts boxed her in: Terasita had known Robin's birthday, about her temper tantrums, the psychiatrist. *And* the flower, the rosebud, the vanity object that sat fresh every morning in George's lapel like an insignia.

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She had a few more drinks, then wine with dinner, all to build a fire wall around her decision. She announced to Marta that she was going out and to be sure to put on the burglar alarm after she left. Then she weaved unsteadily to the door, groping in her handbag to find her car keys.

Daylight-saving prolonged the day, but now a warm darkness was descending, turning the traffic lights into strange primary colors like billiard balls. There was the usual caravan of Rolls and Jaguars in the hotel courtyard. Tourists and business travelers were waiting under the portico to go to dinner. Hotels always gave her an electric feeling of guilt, as if she were being summoned to a cool dim suite where champagne was cooling in a bucket and a naked man smoked a languid cigarette on the bed.

She called George's room on the house phone but it rang and rang before the operator asked if she could take a message. Mrs. Simbro abruptly hung up. She could feel the anger beginning to percolate, released by the alcohol. Why hadn't she called before she left the house?

There was one other place he could be, knowing George's proclivities—and she was right. Standing at the entrance of the lounge she saw him sitting with a young woman. George was smoking a short cigar and twirling a brandy snifter, man of the world.

As she crossed to him he saw her, got up, excusing himself to the startled young woman. He left his cigar and brandy on the bar. He tried to guide her off to the side, but she broke away.

"You've been drinking," he said. "I can always tell by your eyes."

"Don't talk irrelevancies. I want to speak to you."

She took off after him as he headed out to the lobby. A few people looked up from their drinks and cappuccinos.

"You took my daughter," she said to him as they waited for an elevator. "That's a serious felony. I could have you up on a child abduction charge."

He gave her a queer, quizzical look and darted into an elevator as soon as it arrived. She was right with him; he couldn't shake her now. He punched a button and they started to ascend. There was no one else in the elevator.

"You haven't answered my question," she said.

"What question was that?"

"Did you or did you not take Robin?"

"Of course not. I don't do things like that."

That temporarily stymied her. In her confused state it was hard

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to be logical. Where was her proof? The crystal ball of a lunatic Guatemalan who eked out a threadbare living reading body language and other emotional barometers?

The door opened and she silently followed him down a deeply carpeted corridor—a rose pattern in the fabric, everywhere roses!

He opened the door to the suite, held it open like the gentleman he once was so she could precede him inside. It was practically the room she fantasized: a champagne bucket with an empty bottle, but no naked man on the bed. A television console droned in a corner, the screen bluish, phantasmal.

And then she saw Robin looking at her, standing in the dark hallway leading to the bedroom. George shot a quick wary glance from one to the other, and then back again, suddenly shrinking away, almost willing himself invisible. . . .

"Robin?" Mrs. Simbro said tentatively. "What is this all about? Did you run away? What—?"

Robin came further into the room. She wore a Rolling Stones T-shirt with an orgasmic face of Mick Jagger and rumpled jeans. She seemed remarkably cool and self-possessed.

"Why did you do this to me?" Mrs. Simbro asked.

"Because I can't stand living in your concentration camp any longer. Because you trashed your marriage to Dad, killing the only decent thing in your life and ours. Because you treat Marta like, like an imbecilic coolie. Because you've turned into a horrible mean drunken old woman." She paused, getting her breath. "Any more reasons? Or are those sufficient?"

Mrs. Simbro felt faint, each word a piece of shrapnel. "So—so it was your decision to run away."

"Yes!"

George cleared his throat, the invisible man flexing his vocal cords. "She called me and I came out. I told her to go back home but she wanted time to think things over. She stayed here with me. I told her that what she was doing to you, no matter what she thought of you, was hurtful and insensitive—so I gave her an ultimatum. Tomorrow I'd have to tell you and the police."

"You've broken the law. You signed a Missing Persons report."

He gestured helplessly. "So be it. She's coming back with me to Chicago."

"She can't. She has school. And the court awarded Robin to me."

Robin snorted, beginning to take the curlers from her hair. "Do you really want me back under your roof? Every day will be a war. That I can promise you!"

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No . . . no, Mrs. Simbro thought. I can't fight a war. She was feeling faint again, unsteady on her legs.

"I want to go back to the house one last time," Robin said. "There's some things I need."

Mrs. Simbro sat in the dark living room while George helped the girl pack and take the suitcases and hangers out to his car. She had poured herself a drink, all gin now, and at times she pressed the cold tumbler to her flushed forehead.

Finally they were all through. Robin went silently to the car and George stuck his head under the archway, a pained look on his face. He said a quiet goodbye.

It was only when she heard him backing the car into the street that she realized that Robin had taken the dog too. She cried out something unintelligible in the dark and went into the foyer where she saw Marta staring off at the dwindling taillights of the Mercedes. She saw the partially masked hatred on her face.

"Marta . . ."

The young woman started, the mask instantly slipping back into place. She said nothing.

"I always suspected," Mrs. Simbro said, "that he had an affair with you."

She didn't have to answer, her wounded expression was the confirmation.

"So in your anger—after he didn't make good on his promises—you told your friend Terasita to make me suspicious. You told her about the rosebud and Robin's tantrums and the other things."

Marta was looking out the window again.

"Is Terasita really a psychic or did you make that up too?"

Marta turned abruptly and walked past her through the foyer back toward the kitchen.

"You will leave in the morning," Mrs. Simbro called after her. "I'll give you a month's severance pay. Do you hear?"

Then she hiccupped and gagged and she brought a hand to her mouth, stifling a giggle.

She was about to return to her drink in the living room when she saw it on the parquet floor: George's rosebud. In all the moving, carting things out to the car, he had dropped it.

She picked it up, staring at its delicate whorls for a moment, then, choking back a sob, crushed it in her fist. It was going to be a very lonely house. But most of all—she was going to miss the dog. . . . ●

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ONE BAG OF COCONUTS

by Edward D. Hoch

Like many of Ed Hoch's series characters, Jeffrey Rand was created specially for *EQMM*. Over the more than thirty years Rand's adventures have appeared in this magazine the type of case he takes has evolved from espionage laced with cryptography to more general detecting, but even today a Rand story usually finds the globe-trotting former spy in an exotic locale. ¶

The suntanned man with the wild hair passed through customs at Heathrow Airport without difficulty, carrying a single suitcase and a burlap sack clearly marked "Coconuts." Both had been checked in Madagascar to avoid having them pass through gate security points. After glancing in the suitcase and feeling a few of the coconuts through the burlap, the inspector waved the traveler on. After all, he had come from a place where coconut palms were commonplace. Hurrying through the waiting crowd, knowing no one would be meeting him, the man headed outdoors toward the line of London taxis in the covered loading area. A driver stepped out to take his suitcase and the man was just opening the back door to enter the cab when his body seemed to jerk and tumble forward. A blossom of blood grew suddenly in the center of his back.

The bag of coconuts landed on the pavement next to the taxi. That bag of coconuts was to summon Jeffrey Rand out of retirement.

Rand had visited the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square before, but this was his first meeting with Mr. Ralph Coir of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, Division of Law Enforcement. "I'm retired, you know," he said after the amenities had been dealt with.

Coir was a bald man running to overweight. He wore thick glasses and must have been near retirement age himself. "Mr.

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Rand, you were recommended by a high government official as being the perfect man for this job. You would be paid on a per diem basis, plus expenses. I understand that you did a good bit of intelligence work during the Cold War, and in recent years you've been invaluable in certain African matters."

Rand laughed at the suggestion. "I'm hardly an African expert."

Ralph Coir flipped through the pages of a report on the desk in front of him. "It says here you met your future wife in nineteen seventy-one while on assignment in Egypt. You returned there in seventy-two, seventy-four, ninety-four, and ninety-six. In nineteen ninety-three, you were on a ship in the Red Sea, and in ninety-four you performed an invaluable service on an island off the east coast of Africa."

Rand smiled slightly. There was no point in growing angry about this combing through of his life. "I believe you missed some of the Egyptian visits. My wife is from Cairo and we return there frequently."

Coir folded his hands on the papers, signifying they had served their purpose. "I'm especially interested in your visits to the East African islands because this present business concerns Madagascar. I stopped there myself recently, on my way back from South Africa. The flora and fauna of that island are fantastic. It's a thousand miles long and a nation all by itself since the French granted independence in nineteen sixty. The people are more Malayan-Indonesian than African or Arab."

Rand shrugged. "How does all this concern me?"

Coir showed him a head-and-shoulders photograph of a man with a deep tan and unruly hair. His eyes were closed. "This is Telga Toliara. He was killed at Heathrow Airport two days ago."

"Killed? How?"

"Shot. Scotland Yard thinks it was a silenced weapon which may have been concealed in a cane. At least no one heard or saw it happen. He was just entering a taxi, carrying this." He reached beneath the desk and brought up a burlap bag marked "Coconuts."

Rand felt them through the bag and then untied the top, reaching inside. He gave a yelp of pain and surprise as something alive nipped at his finger. "What in hell—?"

"I'm sorry," the American said. "I should have warned you." He tipped the bag and emptied a dozen medium-sized turtles onto the desktop. "We cleaned and fed them, of course. I only returned them to the burlap to give you some idea of how they slipped through customs."

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"Turtles?" Rand stared at them in amazement, clutching his bitten finger.

"To be exact, they're radiated tortoises, very rare. Females are worth about ten thousand dollars each on the black market when they're fully grown. They were being smuggled from Madagascar to Florida by way of London. The dead man was changing planes at Heathrow. They ended up on my desk, as do all smuggled animals bound for America." He smiled slightly. "Of course, with the coconut label on the bag the embassy people thought they were being funny presenting it to me."

"You want me to investigate a case of animal smuggling?" Rand asked in a sceptical tone of voice.

"That, and murder. You know the east coast of Africa, even if not Madagascar itself. More than that, you've had a lifetime of intelligence work."

"Certainly there must be Americans who—"

"An American in this area would arouse too much suspicion. That's why we asked for your government's help. It's an illegal ten-billion-dollar business, Mr. Rand."

"What do you want from me?"

He indicated the tortoises. "Trace these back to their source, find us the people behind the smuggling operation and Toliara's murder, and we might be able to shut down at least the Madagascar part of this operation."

That was how Rand came to arrive in Antananarivo, called Tana, the centrally located capital city where more than a million and a half people suffered daily in the tropical heat. The city itself sprawled over the sides of a dozen red-dirt hills, and the slanted roofs on many of its low native and French colonial buildings hinted at heavy seasonal rains. At this time of the year, late spring, it was merely hot.

Why Rand had taken on the contract work for the United States Fish and Wildlife Service was something he had a hard time explaining to Leila, his wife of more than twenty years. But she was still teaching at Reading University and would be for another few weeks until semester's end. At least the trip to Madagascar should keep him from growing bored.

Someone once called Tana a city of dusty beauty. It was all of that, but Rand soon determined that the dust which filled the air was really smoke, drifting in from burning forests and grasslands far away. The roads were cluttered with carts drawn by zebu,

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Indian beasts of burden that resembled oxen. As he passed a man carrying a live chicken over his shoulder, no doubt for an evening meal, he decided it was not a city he would like to call home.

On the lengthy plane trip Rand had read about the island's unique wildlife in a government report Coir had given him. Madagascar was the only place on earth where lemurs lived in the wild. There were three-foot-long chameleons and various other unique reptiles, including the valuable radiated tortoise. The free-market democracy that had replaced the country's Communist dictatorship in 1993 was still working out its kinks, and smugglers had found that the illegal trade in exotic pets was one of the few dependable businesses around. It was also one of the safer ones. Customs officials, on the lookout for cocaine, often missed a smuggled supply of cockatoo eggs from Australia or radiated tortoises from Madagascar. Even if the smugglers were caught and convicted, a first offense might not bring prison time.

Rand had been given the address of Toliara's house near the downtown area. Hiring a taxi to take him there, he found a square two-story building with a gated passageway leading to an interior courtyard. It was one of the better sections of the city and he was surprised that the gate was unlocked. He asked the driver to wait and stepped inside. The first thing he saw in the courtyard was a large shade tree with a bright green lizard scurrying toward him along one branch. He drew back in alarm and heard gentle laughter from somewhere behind him.

"Don't worry. Max won't hurt you," a woman's voice reassured him.

For a moment he still could not see her. Then a flash of red on an upstairs balcony caught his eye and he observed a young woman with blond hair descending an iron staircase from the second floor. She wore a long housecoat and as she drew nearer he saw that she was barefoot. "My name is Adelaide Toliara, and you are Mr.—?"

"Rand. I'm British."

"I could tell," she said with a smile. Her accent was British colonial and it took him a moment to place it.

"And you're Australian."

"Very good, Mr. Rand."

"Adelaide. Named after the city."

"Of course." She'd come up to him now and even without shoes she was almost his height. "What do you want? Have you brought home my husband's ashes?"

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"I'm sorry, no. I imagine his death was a great shock to you."

"Not especially. The only shock was that he died at the London airport rather than in a Tana brothel."

Rand glanced uncomfortably at the lizard, which hung from a branch directly over his head. "Might we go inside for a chat?"

"It's too hot in there. Come over in the shade. We have a table and chairs."

He followed her across the courtyard to a green wrought-iron table with four matching chairs. The lizard made no attempt to follow. Adelaide picked up a small bell on the table and rang it. A native servant appeared and she asked Rand what he'd like to drink.

"Something cool would be nice," he admitted.

"The water isn't fit to drink, but I have some Tusker from the mainland."

He'd drunk the African beer before. "That'll be fine."

"Two Tuskers," she told the servant, who retreated in silence.

"Do you live here alone?" Rand asked.

"When my husband is away. I guess now he's away permanently." She thought about that, then added, "But I have a great many friends. Sometimes they stay overnight. And my servant Janje has a room downstairs."

"I wanted to talk to you about Telga's business," he said as the servant returned with glasses and two bottles of Tusker.

"The animal business."

"Yes."

She sighed and poured herself a beer. "I came here from Australia three years ago to work as a teacher. Telga was virtually the first person I met on the island. I knew he was in the export business but I didn't learn about the animal trade until after we were married. It seemed harmless enough." For the first time she allowed her pale blue eyes to meet Rand's.

"The smuggling and selling of exotic animals is big business these days. Those tortoises your husband was carrying could be worth ten thousand dollars each when grown."

"That much?"

"I need to know where he obtained them, Mrs. Toliara."

She tilted her head slightly, as if thinking about the question and how to answer it. Finally she said, "I'm told the jungles of Madagascar are full of exotic animals. As our population increases, more and more of those jungles are being burnt away, not unlike the rain forests of the Amazon. Telga told me that if the

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animals weren't captured and exported they'd die."

"I suppose there's some truth to that," Rand agreed. "But the fact remains that this animal trade is illegal, and a great many people are profiting from it. Was your husband capturing the animals himself?"

"No, no!" She scoffed at the idea. "He bought them from a middleman, someone named Frier at the Ice Cream Bar. It used to sell ice cream, now it sells whiskey and women."

"Do you know Frier? Could you introduce me?"

She hesitated only a moment. "I could, but what's in it for me?"

"You might help find your husband's killer."

A slow smile curled her lips. "I could do that, yes. Finish your beer and we'll go for a walk. The Ice Cream Bar is only a half-mile down the road."

Rand sent the waiting taxi on its way and walked with her. She had not bothered with shoes, and he realized now that the red housecoat was really some sort of native dress. "Don't your feet get dusty?" he asked, watching the sand gradually coat her red toenails.

"I don't like shoes. My feet sweat in this climate."

The Ice Cream Bar no longer catered to children. Though it was still midafternoon, a half-dozen men loitered at the bar and a few others sat at a table playing some sort of gambling game with matchsticks. They seemed to be Malaysians, though Rand couldn't be certain. A couple of dusky women sat together at one end of the bar, ignored by the men.

Adelaide spoke quietly to one of the men at the bar and he glanced over at Rand. He was dressed better than the others, in a shirt with epaulets that might have indicated a ship's officer, but his thin body and sallow complexion hinted at some recent illness. He sauntered over and joined them at a table. "This is Captain Frier," Adelaide said. "Mr. Rand."

Frier smiled, showing a gold tooth, and shook hands. "You're interested in animals?"

"At the moment, radiated tortoises."

"Very rare. Each one is different, you know."

"Mrs. Toliara's husband was killed smuggling them into Heathrow Airport."

"I was sorry to hear that. Such things are rare. It's not a violent game."

"What do you deal in?" Rand asked.

"Reptiles. Snakes and tortoises. They're the best because they

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can survive long trips without food or water. Birds and monkeys are tough. Only ten percent of the birds survive."

"Aren't the customs agents on this end watching for them?"

Frier raised a hand and signaled the bartender. "Another rum here. You want anything?" Rand and Adelaide both ordered Tuskers. "When things are tight we take the animals off the island in speedboats. Madagascar has no coast guard."

"But Telga left from here, planning to change planes in London for a flight to Orlando, Florida."

Captain Frier shrugged. "That means he paid someone at the airport. It's often done. A safer way these days is to transport the animals by boat to the French island of Réunion, east of here, or to South Africa. There the animals are supplied with fake documents indicating they've been bred in captivity, making their shipment legal."

"Do you have a boat for this?" Rand asked.

Frier squinted at him and grinned. "I could find you one."

Adelaide was getting nervous. "He's an investigator, Frier, not a customer."

"I'm trying to learn about the business," Rand admitted. "For example, which is easier to smuggle, snakes or tortoises?"

"Snakes," Frier answered at once. "They can fit into almost any shape of cavity and stay there. I can introduce you to a couple of the boys, if you're looking for a boa."

"I want to know where the tortoises come from."

"One good place is Tulear, on the southwest coast. Ask around for a woman named Gin. She is known as the tortoise merchant."

When Rand and Adelaide left the Ice Cream Bar he asked if she'd be staying on now that her husband was dead. "Of course," she answered. "Where else would I go?"

"But what is there for you here?"

She shrugged. "I like the animals."

The plane that took Rand from the capital to Tulear was a small propeller craft that seemed to cruise along barely above the treetops. He saw a great deal of the country during the two hours of the flight, passing over burning grasslands and once flying straight through a cloud of smoke rising from a jungle river basin. The airport at Tulear was smaller than Tana's, but flying over the town's harbor he was impressed by the blueness of the water. As soon as he stepped from the plane he felt a cool breeze that offered welcome relief from the oppressive heat of the capital city.

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It was a poor town, with a sense of desperation about it. Along the beach fishermen caught what they could, and tropic winds sent eddies of sand into the air. Still, there was a beach hotel for tourists and Rand took a room there. The first man he asked about Gin, the tortoise merchant, spit on the ground and walked away. He had better luck with a teenage boy, offering him money before asking the question. "Gin Gin," the boy answered with a grin, grabbing at the folded bill. "She lives with the tortoises. Down that street to the end, a small house with a tin roof." Then he was gone.

Rand walked quickly down the street, careful to avoid the occasional groups of young men who stood watching him. It was not a place he'd like to be after dark. There was only one house with a tin roof, and he knocked at the rickety door. After a moment a native woman appeared. "I am interested in tortoises," he told her.

"Come in," she answered in French. It was a language Rand knew moderately well. He was surprised to hear it spoken here until he remembered the island's former ties with France.

"You are Gin?"

"Yes. I will show you tortoises."

She was slim and moderately attractive, with dark hair and eyes. Her age was impossible to guess. It might have been thirty or fifty. He followed her into the tin-roofed shack and she showed him a pen piled two and three deep with radiated tortoises. There were easily two dozen of them, a fortune to this woman if she were halfway around the world in Florida. Rand reached out to touch their shells, marveling at the grooved black lines broken by designs of white and beige, no two alike.

"What do you sell these for?" he asked.

She mentioned a figure in Malagasy francs about equal to one pound, far from the ten thousand American dollars these would bring at their final destination. "That is for local people, for food. Three times that much for others like yourself."

At three pounds they were still a fantastic bargain. "Do you know a man named Telga Toliara? Is he a customer?"

"He comes in a boat, buys many tortoises at a time. I have not seen him in a few weeks."

"He's dead," Rand told her, "killed in London."

"A dangerous city."

Rand glanced out the door where the young men loitered. "It's not exactly safe around here."

"They protect me," she said simply.

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"Where do these tortoises come from? I'm seeking the source."

"Up the coast. The natives catch them and bring them to me in outrigger canoes."

"When is the next shipment due?"

Gin shrugged. "Maybe tonight. But they will not trust you. Your clothes are too new. They always expect the gendarmes."

"I needed something to wear in the jungle," Rand explained. "The rest of my things are at the hotel."

"Why bother with a hotel when you can sleep on the sand under the stars?"

"My ageing bones cry out for a mattress," he told her. "I will come back after dark."

"Perhaps around ten," she suggested as he handed her some francs.

The town seemed to take on a new life after dark, with the sound of an Indian sitar being played somewhere in the distance. There were bonfires along the beach, and groups of people Rand could barely make out, some kneeling for rites he could only imagine. Somewhere far out over the water the glowing trail of a skyrocket streaked across the heavens and then arced into the sea. He moved cautiously, aware of the possibilities for trouble. Once he passed a man in a white suit carrying a furled umbrella, looking completely out of place. But then he no doubt looked out of place himself.

The woman Gin was waiting for him. "They are coming tonight, soon," she told him. She carried a large woven basket, as if for shopping.

"How do you know?"

"Did you see the rocket a few minutes ago? That is Kriter's signal. His canoe will be here soon."

They walked down to the water together, watching the waves dash against the sand. He loved seeing it, remembering his boyhood visits to Brighton beach where there was nothing but pebbles waiting for another ten thousand years of erosion to grind them into sand.

The outrigger canoe was on them before Rand realized it, and a bare-chested young Malaysian leapt out to pull it onto shore. "Only nine tonight, Gin," he said in French. "They're all busy mating."

She flipped back the burlap covering and shined a small flashlight on them. Rand could see the radiating lines of the tortoise shells, as different as fingerprints. "I'll take them," she said quickly.

Kriter motioned toward Rand. "You got a buyer here already?"

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"Maybe." She hoisted the sack full of tortoises onto the sand and took several Malagasy franc notes from her pocket.

"There'll be more next time," he promised, pushing off in the outrigger. The entire transaction had taken only a few minutes.

Gin shook her head in disgust. "He usually has seventy or eighty for me. I think he's selling to someone else up the beach."

Rand remembered the man in the white suit. "Is this the rainy season here?"

"No rain until next month," she told him.

"Have you seen any strangers lately? A man in a white suit with an umbrella?"

"There are always tourists."

He took the bag full of radiated tortoises from her, careful not to put his fingers in it. "I may want to buy these from you later. First I'm going to take a walk up the beach. If Kriter landed somewhere else first, where might it have been?"

"Perhaps Ankil Cove, two miles north of here."

"Can I walk along the beach?"

"At night?"

"Right now."

She shrugged. "It is safer than through the jungle. There is a small village there, but the natives are friendly." He wondered if she was mocking him.

After carrying the sack of turtles back to her shack, he returned to the beach and set off up the coast. The stars seemed different from those he saw in London, brighter and more numerous without the glare of city lights. In spots the beach narrowed as the jungle reached out, but for the most part it was an easy, pleasant walk, his way lit by a full moon. Finally, ahead, he saw more bonfires on the beach and knew he'd reached the village at Ankil Cove. That was when he saw the man in the white suit again.

He turned as Rand approached, almost in slow motion, and raised his furled umbrella. Rand dove sideways into the sand, but not quite quickly enough. The silenced bullet creased the side of his head, and everything went black.

When he awakened it was morning, and by the light from the sun he could see small octopuses hung out to dry on racks, already caught by the dawn fishermen. Crouched next to him on the sand, staring into his face, was a lizard he'd seen before.

"Back among the living, Mr. Rand?" a voice asked, and he turned his head slightly to see Adelaide Toliara standing there in

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a short beach jacket, her legs bare beneath it. She put her arm down to Max and the lizard ran up to her shoulder, its long tail swishing from side to side.

"What happened to me?" he managed to ask. The side of his head hurt a bit, but otherwise he seemed all right.

"You were shot. Luckily the bullet only grazed your skull. I bathed it with some palm oil."

"It was the man in the white suit. Where is he?"

"I don't know. He thinks you're dead."

"He's the one who killed your husband."

Her eyes closed for just an instant and then she opened them and asked, "Why do you say that?"

"Scotland Yard suspected Toliara was killed with a silenced gun hidden inside a cane, because no one heard or saw it. It isn't the rainy season here, yet this man was carrying a furled umbrella. He was certainly out of place, and when I saw him point that umbrella at me I dove for the sand. You know him, don't you?"

"I know him, yes."

Rand tried to sit up. It made his head hurt. For just an instant he was seeing double and it seemed as if the lizard's head were on Adelaide's body. "What are you doing here, anyway? And what's that lizard doing around your neck?"

"Max is a Madagascan day gecko. Very rare. Most geckos found elsewhere are nocturnal. As for what I'm doing here, I'm completing my husband's work."

"You bought the tortoises from Kriter last night."

"Is there anything wrong with that?"

"A woman called Gin was waiting for them on the beach in Tulear."

Adelaide snorted. "She is nothing. She swindled Telga out of a whole shipment once."

"Where is the man in the white suit now?"

"Stop calling him that! His name is Sidney Moullion. He's South African."

"Why did he kill your husband?"

"He had no reason to kill him," she said, reaching back to stroke Max's head.

"But he came here to help you smuggle tortoises."

"One last time. Telga had another trip on his contract."

"What's Moullion's part in all this?"

"Ask him yourself. He'll be coming back for me soon."

"Back here? What for?" Rand was immediately on alert.

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"He has some work to do. Then we'll leave together. I've got sixty-five radiated tortoises in sacks."

"Are you going to carry those through customs? More bags of coconuts?" He stood up, shakily, and surveyed the area in all directions. If Sidney Moullion was coming back, he wanted to be ready this time.

"I'll get them through," she assured him.

Off in the distance Rand heard the sound of an approaching speedboat. Adelaide's smile vanished. "You should take cover somewhere. I don't want any more shooting."

"It's him, isn't it?"

"Might be." She dropped the gecko to the ground and motioned Rand into the jungle.

"If you're taking the tortoises, what's he coming back for?"

"I don't know." She seemed distracted. "He does something to them."

"Does something?"

The boat came into view, heading directly for the beach. Rand quickly retreated from view, taking cover at the edge of the trees. He could see Moullion at the wheel of the sleek craft, killing the engine and gliding to a gentle halt in the surf. Adelaide Toliara ran to meet him. The South African waded through the shallow water, looking a bit foolish as he clutched his umbrella.

The woman was speaking to him, carrying on a conversation perhaps meant to distract him from questions about Rand. But as they came closer he heard Moullion ask, "Where is the body?"

"I dragged it into the jungle," she answered.

He studied the sand for a moment and then grabbed her by the arm. "The truth! There are no drag marks in the sand!"

"I—"

"He's alive, isn't he?"

All her pent-up fury seemed to explode then. "Damn it, Sidney, why did you have to kill Telga?"

"That's none of your business." He dropped his umbrella and swung his fist at her.

Prudence might have told Rand to flee deeper into the underbrush, but there was the woman to be considered. He burst from his hiding place and shouted, "Here I am!"

Before Moullion could reach for the umbrella, Rand was on him, toppling him, tussling in the sand. They rolled over once, and Rand already knew he was no match for the younger man. The South African was on top, closing his hands around Rand's throat,

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when there came a gentle cough behind him. Rand recognized the sound of a silenced gunshot even before the man's hands loosened on his throat.

"I had to do it," Adelaide said, holding the smoking umbrella.

Moullion had rolled over on his back, gasping for breath. Rand leaned close and said, "You're dying. Tell me what's behind this."

He opened his mouth but at first no words came out. Then he patted the breast pocket of his white jacket and mumbled something. Rand strained to hear it. "Diamonds to coconut," Moullion said, and then he was gone.

"Did I kill him?" Adelaide asked.

"You did, and saved my life in the process." He reached into the dead man's breast pocket and took out a folded envelope sealed with tape. "Do you know about this?" he asked her.

"What is it?"

Rand tore a corner off the envelope and poured the contents into the palm of his hand. "Diamonds, and fair-sized ones at that. There must be fifty of them, at least."

She nodded. "From South Africa. I should have known."

"His dying words were 'Diamonds to coconuts.' But how was he smuggling them?"

"Inside the tortoises," she said. "Telga told me once that he seemed to be force-feeding them with some sort of baster. We never knew exactly what he was doing."

"Smuggling diamonds inside of smuggled tortoises. That's a new one on me," Rand admitted. "But it still doesn't tell us why he killed your husband."

"What will I do now?" Adelaide asked, more to herself than to Rand.

"I'd suggest you leave the body here. Turn the tortoises loose and go home. I'll take care of things in London." He picked up the fallen umbrella gun from where she'd dropped it.

"It's over, then?"

"For you. I have one more bit of business."

It had suddenly occurred to him what Moullion's dying words meant.

Ralph Coir welcomed Rand like some nineteenth-century explorer who'd located the source of the Nile. "I read your report, Rand. That was a magnificent piece of work. With Moullion's death this entire smuggling operation seems to have been closed down. I know it's only one of many, but an important one."

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"The umbrella gun?"

The bald man nodded. "Ballistics says it's the weapon that killed Telga Toliara, just as you suspected. And the diamonds were a great surprise to everyone." He smiled at Rand. "Your report says Moullion was shot accidentally as you struggled over the weapon."

"That's more or less how it happened."

"Did he ever say why he shot Toliara at Heathrow Airport?"

"No, but I think I can answer that question," Rand said. "You see, there was something staring me in the face from the very beginning and I didn't see it."

"What was that?" Coir asked.

"If Toliara was changing planes at Heathrow for a flight to Florida with the tortoises, why had he passed through customs? Why was he outside the building entering a taxi?"

"Perhaps he had a layover of several hours."

"Even if he had, why double his risk by passing through customs twice, here and in Florida? He could have remained in the transit lounge and allowed his checked luggage and sack of coconuts to be loaded directly onto the Florida plane. The truth was, he never intended to continue on to Florida. He was going to find a buyer on his own in London. Moullion must have been at Heathrow to guard against just such a possibility, and when he saw it happening he killed Toliara."

Ralph Coir shifted uneasily at his desk. "What did he accomplish by that? The coconuts—the tortoises—were still lost to him, along with their hidden cargo of diamonds."

"I asked myself the same question. He might have acted instinctively, without weighing the consequences of his act, but that seemed highly unlikely. There was another possibility. He may have known that by killing Toliara he wasn't abandoning the prize but actually saving it. This could only be true if he knew that the sack of smuggled tortoises, once found by the police, would eventually end up on the desk of his partner in crime—yourself, Mr. Coir."

"That's ridiculous!" the bald man sputtered. "What are you trying to do, Rand?"

"Just get at the truth. You hired me, remember? I suppose you needed some sort of investigation for the record, and never thought I'd get as far as I did. You told me yourself that seized animals bound for America ended up here. If you couldn't arrange somehow to keep them yourself, you could still remove the ship-

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ment of South African diamonds they'd been fed. I remember you told me you'd visited South Africa recently."

Coir stared at Rand with fiery eyes. "It's too bad Sidney Moullion isn't alive to back up your assertions."

"He talked about it before he died," Rand said blandly.

"Talked? What did he say?"

"His exact words were 'Diamonds to coconuts.' It meant nothing to me at first, but then I remembered you mentioning that the embassy staff thought they were being funny presenting you with a bag of coconuts. It's your name, Mr. Coir. Coconut fiber, used in rope and matting, is called *coir*. To Moullion 'coconuts' was a code name for Ralph Coir, and it was the word he spoke as he was dying."

The American actually snickered. "Wow! I'd like to see that one get laughed out of court!"

"Oh, I doubt if it will come to court. I have filed a report on my suspicions with your superiors, however. I think it's time you got out of the exotic pet business and the diamond business too, Mr. Coir."

Ralph Coir stood up. "I believe we've talked long enough, Mr. Rand. Good day, sir."

"Good day," Rand said with a smile. "I'll submit a bill for my expenses." ●

BIRD BRAINED?

by John H. Abbott

A detective who worked as a narc
Met his stoolie one day in the park;
He got more than a smidgen
Of news from his pigeon
And said, "Gee, he sings like a lark."

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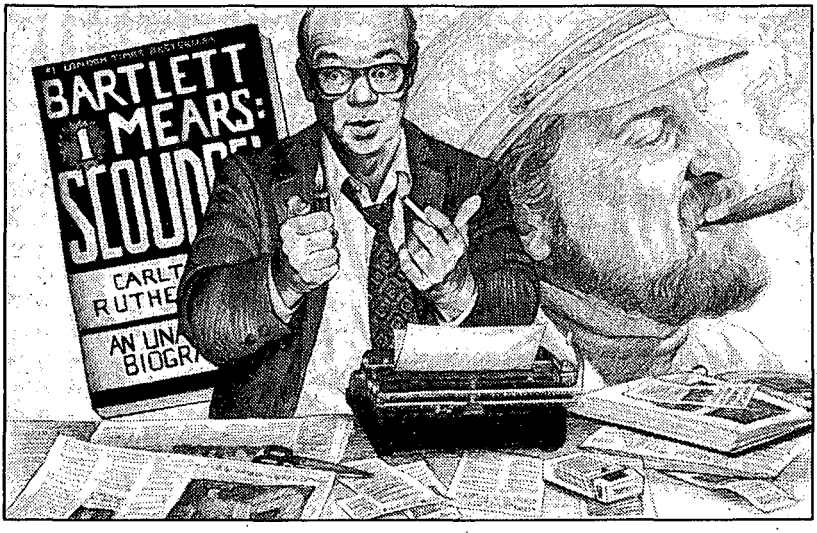

Art by Laurie Harden

The Man Who Got The Dirt

by Simon Brett

To have killed Bartlett Mears from motives of jealousy would have been a small-minded, petty crime; but fortunately Carlton Rutherford had a much more respectable, wholly practical reason for eliminating his old rival.

Murder had not been involved in his original plans for settling old scores, but Carlton Rutherford felt not the tiniest twinge of regret when he realised it would be necessary. In a sense, it would tie together a lot of ends otherwise doomed to eternal looseness.

The rivalry between the two writers had lasted nearly forty years, and though Bartlett Mears, had he been questioned on the subject, would have dismissed it with a characteristic shrug, for

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Carlton Rutherford the wound had never healed, and its scab required daily repicking.

Both had written their first novels at the end of the fifties. By then Kingsley Amis, John Osborne, and others, burglarising the shrine of pre-war British values and shattering its first hollow images, had declared the open season for iconoclasm.

Carlton Rutherford, at that period climbing the north face of a doctorate on George Gissing at the University of Newcastle, had used his spare time to good effect and written his first novel, *Neither One Thing nor the Other.*

This was a work of searingly fashionable nihilism, the story of Bob Grantham, a working-class genius, son of a postman in Salford, who struggled, against the odds of misunderstanding parents and virginity-hugging girls, all the way up to university. The book contrived to pillory traditional educational values, and at the same time potentially to alienate everyone with whom the author had come into contact in the twenty-five years he had been alive.

And therein lay its problem. Bob Grantham was so patently the *alter ego*—in fact, not even the *alter ego,* just the *ego*—of Carlton Rutherford that all of the book's other characters became readily identifiable.

Dashiel Loukes, the lean and hungry literary agent to whom (randomly, from a reference book in a Newcastle library) the manuscript had been sent, confided to its author over a boozy lunch at Bertorelli's in Charlotte Street that, though he was "excited, but very excited" about the book, he was "just a tidge worried" about the libel risk. And thought a little bit of rewriting might be prudent.

That had been in 1958. Though simplified by the death of both Carlton Rutherford's parents in a charabanc crash soon after his meeting with Loukes (you cannot libel the dead), the rewriting had proved unexpectedly difficult and time-consuming.

Eventually, a year later, at another Bertorelli's lunch, the author presented the agent with a revised manuscript, announcing that he had contrived to disguise all of the living characters save for that of Sandra, the toffee-nosed solicitor's daughter who had proved so tragically insensitive to the exceptional genius of Bob Grantham and so provincially unwilling to be the recipient of his extremely tenacious virginity.

Dashiel Loukes, thin and acute as a greyhound, had asked how

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closely this character resembled its original, and dragged from Carlton Rutherford the unwilling admission that, except for the detail of having had her eyes changed from blue to brown, Sandra was identical in every particular to Sylvia, a toffee-nosed solicitor's daughter who had proved tragically insensitive to the exceptional genius of Carlton Rutherford and provincially unwilling to be the recipient of his extremely tenacious virginity (still, though Carlton did not mention the fact, intact in 1959).

The agent, aware that in *Neither One Thing nor the Other* he had a fashionable and marketable commodity, suggested an extreme solution to the problem. The author should send a copy of his manuscript to Sylvia/Sandra and ask her to give a written undertaking that she would not take any action if the book were published. They had nothing to lose; it was worth a try.

Sylvia/Sandra was not for nothing the daughter of a solicitor. Now married to another solicitor, she was appalled by the manuscript and announced her firm intention to put an immediate injunction on the work if it was ever scheduled for publication.

Another gloomy Bertorelli's lunch, and Carlton Rutherford returned to another year's rewriting. In his new version, the Sylvia/Sandra character was virtually erased from the text. The dynamics of the novel were somewhat weakened by this alteration, but at least *Neither One Thing nor the Other* could now be published without fear of litigation.

But a new shadow stretched over the 1961 Bertorelli's lunch at which Carlton Rutherford handed over his newly sanitised manuscript to Dashiel Loukes. The Sunday papers that week had been full of rave reviews for *Chips on the Elbow,* a first novel by a hitherto-unknown author, Bartlett Mears.

This was a work of searingly fashionable nihilism, the story of Ted Retford, a working-class genius, son of a milkman in Stockport, who struggled, against the odds of misunderstanding parents and virginity-hugging girls, all the way up to university. The book contrived to pillory traditional educational values, but what distinguished it from the novels of the other voguish "angry young men" was that it told the story with a sense of humour.

According to the *Sunday Times,* "It is spiced with a refreshing wit, and, whereas other contemporary novelists have used their tongues to lash outdated institutions, Mr. Mears keeps his firmly—and wisely—in his cheek. *Chips on the Elbow* contrives to express its own distinctive anger while at the same time deflat-

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ing the pretensions of the other 'angry young men.' In Bartlett Mears the arrival of a major new literary talent must be celebrated."

The ensuing events were predictable. When, in 1962, *Neither One Thing nor the Other* was finally published, its launch caused only minor ripples on the surface of literary life. The *Observer* referred to "yet another whining catalogue of the ways in which the working-class misunderstands the hypersensitive artist in its midst," and the *Spectator* even spoke of "a self-regarding diatribe in the manner—but without the wit—of Bartlett Mears."

All this was gall and wormwood to Carlton Rutherford—particularly because he knew he had finished his novel before Bartlett Mears had even started his.

Another spur to fury was the discovery, from the deluge of newspaper profiles and radio and television interviews of the new genius, that Bartlett Mears was not even the genuine article. He was not the son of a milkman in Stockport, but of a bank manager in Guildford. He had been educated at a minor public school and—of all places—Oxford University.

Chips on the Elbow had not been written in the light of bitter experience, but as a patronising satire by a Southerner on the kind of life that Carlton Rutherford had led.

Given such a start, it was perhaps not surprising that the relationship between the two writers should end in murder.

The reception of their first books set the pattern for the future. Carlton Rutherford, having made a borehole into it in *Neither One Thing nor the Other,* continued to mine the rich seam of his own childhood hardship and consequent feelings of alienation. The heroes of his subsequent novels were not all *called* Bob Grantham, but they all *were* Bob Grantham. Or, to put it another way, they all *were* Carlton Rutherford.

However, the vogue for gritty Northern realism passed. Other authors moved on to new subjects. Only Carlton Rutherford continued to produce the same tales of unrecognised genius. And, in an ironically self-fulfilling prophecy, his genius was recognised less and less with each succeeding book.

The novels, laborious to write, became even more laborious to read. Those reviewers who had found promise in *Neither One Thing nor the Other* found it thereafter in decreasing measure,

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and eventually applied their ultimate destructive sanction—by not reviewing Carlton Rutherford's books at all.

Dashiel Loukes, initially such a champion of his author's cause, also proved a fair-weather friend. Through the sixties the agent grew fatter and more sleek as he gathered under his banner an ever-increasing troop of ever-more-popular novelists. His early commitment to what he had described to Carlton Rutherford as "really sensitive literary fiction" gave way in his priorities to the pursuit of the dollar.

Publishing changed, going through yet another of those recurrent attempts to shake off its image as the last refuge of a gentleman and prove it really is a hard-nosed commercial business. This involved, among other economy measures, the shedding of a large number of middle-list "literary novelists."

The British film industry began to disappear. The vogue for films of the type that might have offered Carlton Rutherford hope, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* or *A Kind of Loving*, gave way to breathlessly trendy reflections of Swinging London, which in turn gave way to nothing.

Dashiel Loukes, fatter but still as sharp, trimmed his sails accordingly. He began to specialise in Cold War thrillers, which offered possibilities of lucrative American film deals.

Carlton Rutherford became more and more a dinosaur in the agent's stable of fleet-footed winners.

The crisis came in 1967. Dashiel Loukes was unable to find any publisher willing to take on the latest novel, in which Bob Grantham (by now named Sid Doncaster and working as a novelist) had another disastrously unconsummated love affair and suffered from writer's block.

For Carlton Rutherford, though it still continued to strain constipatedly off the typewriter, the writing was on the wall.

His agent broke the news in a pub one evening after work. Carlton Rutherford no longer justified the expense of a lunch. Indeed, had the author not insisted on a face-to-face meeting, Dashiel Loukes would have made the perfunctory severance by telephone.

(As things turned out, though, the encounter was not without its uses for the agent. He was at the time in the throes of a very heavy affair with an editor from Hamish Hamilton. Telling his wife he had to meet "that dreary old bellyacher Carlton Rutherford" gave him the perfect alibi. So long as he kept the actual meeting brief—which he ensured that he did—Dashiel Loukes

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efficiently managed to carve out two hours of uninterrupted bliss between the editor's satin sheets in Notting Hill.)

Such categorical obliteration of his hopes might have turned a less resilient author away from the literary life for good, but it did not have that effect on Carlton Rutherford. Partly, he was made of sterner stuff; and partly, his doctorate on George Gissing having been abandoned some years before, there was nothing else he could do.

So Carlton Rutherford set about constructing something which a surprisingly large number of other literary folk have managed—a career as a writer that does not involve the publication of books. He gave lectures on the theory and practice of writing. He attended seminars and symposia on writing. He joined writers' committees. He wrote reviews of an increasingly waspish nature, deploring the decline of British letters since . . . well, since his own books had been regarded as publishable.

And, of course, he taught creative writing courses.

In spite of all these activities, he still found time to go on writing his own novels, which charted further the conspiracy of an unfeeling and philistine world against Bob Grantham.

And he lived in daily anticipation of a change in the fickle tastes of the literary marketplace. The revived career of Barbara Pym in the late seventies prompted hopes for a similar rediscovery of Carlton Rutherford. When these were unrealised, he began increasingly to rely on thoughts of posthumous acclaim like that accorded to Gerard Manley Hopkins.

And when such thoughts proved inadequate to check his spleen, Carlton Rutherford comforted himself with fantasies of revenge on the man who had blighted his entire career. Bartlett Mears.

It might have been easier for him if Carlton Rutherford could have been unaware of his rival's activities, but the career of Bartlett Mears continued to maintain the high profile initiated by the success of *Chips on the Elbow*.

Mears, unlike Rutherford, had not allowed himself to be trapped into rewriting the same book time and again. Each of his publications was different from the last, each one attacked a new target, and in each the author's wit was more venomous. The books themselves did not get better—indeed, they undeniably got worse—but they did get reviewed.

And they got talked about. Bartlett Mears had an instinct for

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subject matter that would prompt controversy. His books gave rise to passionate love and passionate hatred in equal measure, but they always gave rise to some reaction. Each new publication was derided as evidence of a sad falling-off in the author's former talents, as each one made its inexorable way onto the bestsellers lists.

It was impossible to be unaware of Bartlett Mears.

He became a media pundit, never far from the centre of literary debate. His opinion was sought on every innovation. His reactions were frequently ill-considered and bad-tempered—sometimes even infantile—but they were always quotable. His favourite weapon was inadequately informed blanket condemnation. He genuinely did not care what people thought about him, and as a result, whether with relish or disgust, people thought about him a great deal.

The profile of Bartlett Mears's domestic life was equally high. *Private Eye* would have been lost without him.

A few well-publicised affairs with glamorous literati preceded a very public divorce from his pre-celebrity wife. More well-publicised affairs preceded his very public courtship of, and marriage to, the dauntingly attractive and intelligent novelist and critic Mariana Lestrange, another potent magnet for gossip columnists and press photographers.

The stormy course of this marriage, its public rows, separations, and ultimate collapse in a spitting crackle of recrimination were known well outside the literary world—even in households where nothing was read more taxing than the *Sun*. Bartlett Mears's subsequent vituperative attacks on his ex-wife and general misogyny added further fuel to the blaze of his publicity.

And all this before one even mentioned the drinking.

Bartlett Mears had started his literary life as an *enfant terrible* and stayed *terrible* long after he had relinquished all possible right to be called an *enfant*.

He was a selfish, drunken loudmouth of diminishing talent, with the physical allure of a warthog, the tact of a rhinoceros, the morals of a sewer rat.

And the public loved him for it.

The more he abused them, the more restaurants he was banned from, the more television programmes he appeared on incapable through drink, the more the public loved him.

Try as he might—and after a while he didn't try that hard—

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Carlton Rutherford could not be unaware of Bartlett Mears and his latest outrage.

Soon, rather than trying to escape references to his rival, the less successful writer was positively seeking them out.

He was well placed to do so. He moved in the same literary world—albeit on its fringes—as Bartlett Mears. The two were frequently in the same room—in restaurants, at book launches, publishers' parties, writers' seminars, newspaper offices—and Carlton Rutherford witnessed many of the famous author's more spectacular misdemeanours.

All of these he chronicled in a notebook, which over the years became a series of notebooks. Soon, in addition, he started building up scrapbooks of newspaper cuttings, and after a while began the practice of soliciting scurrilous gossip about his rival whenever the opportunity arose. So extreme was Bartlett Mears's general behaviour that such opportunities arose frequently. All this adversarial anecdotage was also punctiliously recorded.

Gradually, over thirty years, was built up an exhaustive archive of misbehaviour.

There was no doubt that Carlton Rutherford had got all the dirt on Bartlett Mears.

It was early in 1991 that the idea came to him, and he was immediately impressed by its simplicity and wholeness.

He rang Dashiel Loukes the same day. "There's a project I want to put to you."

The agent, who thought he had permanently shaken off Carlton Rutherford some twenty years before, was instantly evasive. He was very busy, he had all the authors he could cope with, the current state of publishing was too depressing for him to offer any hope to another saga of North Country misunderstanding.

"Ah, but what I'm talking about now is nonfiction," Carlton Rutherford announced triumphantly.

"Well, the state of the nonfiction market is not a lot more encouraging at the—"

"Come on, we must meet and talk about the idea. It's a sure-fire commercial proposition."

Dashiel Loukes tried valiantly to escape, but eventually succumbed to a meeting. He suggested the author should come to his Mayfair office the following Thursday at eleven-thirty, an appointment whose timing proclaimed "Not only am I not offering you

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lunch, but also I am having lunch with someone considerably more important than you."

"What I'm suggesting," Carlton Rutherford pronounced, once he was safely ensconced in the agent's office, "is a biography of Bartlett Mears."

Dashiel Loukes looked up, his face purple from its daily marinade in the good wines of the Garrick and the Groucho. Time had treated his business kindly. Three of his espionage authors were now international bestsellers, and his principal daily task was to sit and work out his percentage of their money as, unprompted, it came rolling in.

"An official biography?" he asked.

"No, no," Carlton Rutherford replied slyly. "An extremely *un*official biography."

"Hm . . ."

"You can't deny that Bartlett Mears is the kind of person the public wants to read about."

"I'm not denying that. It's a matter of *what* they want to read about him. A literary biography of a living author is bound to be a minority sale."

"I'm not talking about a *literary* biography of Bartlett Mears. I'm talking about a *scurrilous* biography. I've got all the dirt," Carlton Rutherford concluded smugly.

Dashiel Loukes was thoughtful. "It's actually not such a bad idea . . ." he conceded.

The author smiled.

"Trouble is . . ."

"What?"

"*You,* Carlton, I'm afraid."

"What? At the absolute lowest, I'm a perfectly competent writer."

"I know, but your name's not . . ."

"Not what?"

"Not *sexy.*"

"I don't see what sex has got to do with it," said Carlton Rutherford, who was always embarrassed by the subject.

"Look, for a project like this—which, as I say, is actually not a bad idea—if I'm going to sell it to a publisher, I'd be on much stronger ground if I was selling it on the name of a well-known journalist or—"

"But you don't want a well-known journalist, you want someone

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who knows the facts. And I can assure you—I've got all the dirt," Carlton Rutherford reiterated.

"Hm . . ." The agent looked at his watch. "Got to be off soon, I'm afraid. Tell you what—I'll have a ring round some publishers this afternoon—see if I get any nibbles—can't say fairer than that, can I?"

The author considered the agent could say a lot fairer than that, but was in no position to argue. Meekly he left the office and went home to his flat in Upper Norwood to eat a boiled egg and wait for the phone to ring.

It rang at a quarter to five. The mellowness of Dashiel Loukes's voice suggested he had only just returned from lunch. "Had a ring round, old boy, like I said I would," he announced bonhomously. "Got quite a positive reaction to the idea of a book about Bartlett, but sorry, your name didn't win too many coconuts."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean there's no chance of my getting a commission for this project with your name attached."

"Oh. But I'm the one who's got the dirt," Carlton Rutherford insisted.

"Maybe. I'm afraid that didn't seem to carry much weight."

"So what do you suggest I do?"

"Well, nothing. Nothing you can do, really. Unless, of course, you want to write the whole thing *on spec* . . ." The agent's voice was aghast at the alien nature of his own suggestion. "I mean, if you did come up with something really scurrilous, I might not have too much problem placing the completed manuscript. But it'd have to be pretty strong stuff . . ."

"Yes . . ."

"And you'd certainly have to talk to Mariana Lestrange. No book on Bartlett can really claim to have all the dirt without a few shovelfuls from her."

"Hm. Right . . ." Carlton Rutherford was silent, until an unpleasant thought came into his head. "Meanwhile, I suppose, your calls will have planted in a few publishers' heads the idea of doing a book about Bartlett Mears . . ."

"Possibly, yes . . ."

"My idea of doing a book about Bartlett Mears!"

"Well . . . They could have come up with it on their own . . ."

"No, they couldn't! They'd never have thought of it if I hadn't asked you to—"

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"Carlton, Carlton . . ." the agent remonstrated. "There is no copyright in ideas. Now you know that as well as I do—don't you, old boy . . . ?"

It didn't take Carlton Rutherford long to make his decision. He had no other means of revenge at his disposal. Besides, if he did not publish his findings, nearly thirty years of chronicling the misdemeanours of Bartlett Mears would have been wasted.

And there was a new spur to action. Now that Dashiel Loukes had spread around London publishers the idea of a book on Bartlett Mears, it was only a matter of time before some suitably "sexy" journalist was commissioned to write one.

Carlton Rutherford reckoned that, because all his research was already done, he had a head start. But only if he got down to the writing straightaway. He knew that experienced journalists could—and frequently did—paste-and-scissor together celebrity biographies over a weekend.

He was greatly reassured as soon as he started the actual writing. So exhaustive had been his chronicling of Bartlett Mears's life that he could copy out most of his notebooks verbatim. The book was virtually written; all it needed was a little judicious editing, to take out the only mildly scurrilous incidents and bring the thoroughly scurrilous ones closer together.

He worked flat-out for three weeks and the draft was done. It was the most searing indictment of a human being he had ever read.

One thing still niggled, though. Dashiel Loukes had been right. No biography of Bartlett Mears would really be complete without an infusion of Mariana Lestrange's distinctive vituperation. Her public set-tos with her former husband were well chronicled; but she was bound to have a store of character-destroying reminiscence of their life together. That was the dash of venom which the biography required.

He got her phone number from a literary editor who gave him occasional reviewing work. She answered the phone with the brusqueness of someone who jealously guards her privacy, but when Carlton Rutherford announced his mission, her manner changed.

Yes, she would be delighted to tell him anything he wanted to know. No fate was bad enough for that bastard Bartlett Mears.

Mariana Lestrange lived in Hampstead. Of course she did.

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Bartlett Mears still lived in Hampstead, come to that. So did the majority of the glamorous literati with whom he had had affairs before, during, and after his second marriage. The supply of them in Hampstead was so constant, he'd rarely felt the need to look elsewhere.

She received the biographer in her imposing sitting room. One of its walls was shelved with British and overseas editions of her novels; another with international awards and citations.

"So," Mariana Lestrange purred in her famously sexy voice, "you want all the real dirt on Bartlett Mears . . . ?"

She must have been nearly sixty, but was still very beautiful. Tall, slender, with a surprisingly ample bosom, she wore her artfully blonded hair as a frame to the small face whose nose would have been too large on someone less striking.

Carlton Rutherford felt a little uneasy in her presence. He always reacted that way to women of obvious sexual attraction. The state of his virginity remained precisely as it had been in 1959.

"Yes," he said nervously. "Anything you're prepared to tell me. Obviously, I know all the stuff that's been in the papers, but, er, anything more intimate would be . . . very welcome . . ."

"Hm. Who's publishing your book?" she asked sharply.

"Well, er . . . The thing is, that's not quite decided yet. . . ."

"Ah, I see. You mean it's going to be auctioned."

Carlton Rutherford did not disabuse her of this error. For a writer of Mariana Lestrange's stature, auctions would be a regular occurrence. She knew nothing of the end of the market where publishers don't fight over books, but have to be cajoled into accepting them, and even then frequently don't.

"Well, where shall we start . . . ?" Mariana purred on. "Impotence the first night I agreed to make love to him . . . ? Or Bartlett peeing over the bed in our honeymoon suite . . . ? Or the time he hit me so hard he broke my jaw . . . ?"

"Oh, any of those. All of those. It all sounds wonderful!" Carlton Rutherford responded gleefully. "Fire away!"

So Mariana Lestrange fired away. She produced a savage catalogue of meanness, drunkenness, sexual malpractice, infidelity, theft, and cringing deceit. She enumerated her former husband's disgusting personal habits—his practice of stubbing out cigarette butts in coffee cups, his self-pitying hypochondria, his pill-gulping, his nose-picking, his belching, his snoring, his halitosis, and the revolting state in which he left his underwear.

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The resentment born of five years' cohabitation seemed not to have mellowed one iota with the passage of time. Only the tiniest of prompts was required to bring it once again bubbling to the surface.

Carlton Rutherford's pen could hardly move quickly enough across the page to record this cataract of domestic villainies. With each new revelation he hugged himself, gleefully envisaging where it could be inserted into his narrative.

Dashiel Loukes had been right. This was the secret ingredient that the biography needed. There is nothing like total character assassination to send a book rocketing up the bestsellers lists.

At times Mariana Lestrange's account sounded so vicious, the antics she described so evil, that Carlton Rutherford almost suspected her novelist's instinct was fictionalising for his benefit, but if ever he asked a hesitant "Did he *really* do that?" she snapped back, "Of course! I know. I lived with the bastard!"

He'd thought he was doing all right before, but after the interview with Mariana Lestrange, he knew he'd *really* got the dirt.

It took him less than a week to thread this new vein of vindictiveness into his text. At the end of that time, Carlton Rutherford checked carefully through his manuscript before delivering it personally to Dashiel Loukes's office. According to the agent's unnervingly pretty assistant, her boss was still out at lunch. Carlton Rutherford thought this slightly odd at five forty-five in the afternoon, but did not question it.

He went back to Upper Norwood to await the reaction to his literary bombshell.

At least this time their meeting merited lunch. Dashiel Loukes took him to the Groucho Club and, bathed in the sunlight of the upstairs dining room, gave his verdict.

"Sorry, old boy. Not a chance in hell of placing it."

"But come on, it's good. All that detail—fascinating stuff. You can't say I haven't got all the dirt, can you?"

"No. Certainly not. No, it's the most compulsive manuscript I've read for years. I was up half the night reading it—absolutely riveting."

"Well then . . . ?"

"It's your old problem, Carlton. Just like it was with *Neither One Thing nor the Other . . .*"

"What do you mean?"

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"Libel, old boy, libel. Your manuscript has got something actionable on every page."

"But it's all true! It's all substantiated. I actually witnessed a lot of it."

"Surely you didn't witness the incident in the gents' lavatory with Joe Orton . . . ? Or the Benedictine-drinking contest with David Niven . . . ? Or that business with Malcolm Muggeridge and the spatula . . . ?"

"No, I wasn't actually there, but it's all true! I got it from Mariana. Anyway, Joe Orton's not going to pop up from the grave to deny it. Nor's David Niven likely to—"

"I agree, old boy. No problems with *them*. They're all safely dead and you can't libel the dead. No, it's Bartlett himself who's likely to make a stink—absolutely guaranteed to make a stink, I'd say."

"But it all happened! Mariana Lestrange said he even used to boast about a lot of it."

"Boasting in private about it is very different from sanctioning the printing of this kind of unsubstantiated gossip."

"Dashiel, how many times do I have to tell you—it's all fully substantiated!"

"Carlton, the bottom line is that I've consulted a top libel lawyer whom I've used many times before. He's read your manuscript and he says it's absolute dynamite."

"But it's *good,"* the author wailed plaintively.

"I'm not denying it. It's very good. Easily the most readable thing you've ever done." Carlton Rutherford decided not to rise to this implied slight to the rest of his *oeuvre* as the agent went on, "But the fact remains that it's good *dynamite.* No publisher will touch it."

"But—"

"No, old boy, you have to face the truth. There is no chance of publication for this book while Bartlett Mears is alive!"

From that moment Carlton Rutherford realised that he would have to commit murder.

The idea didn't worry him at all. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more he relished the prospect.

The manner of Bartlett Mears's killing did not really matter, so long as he ended up safely dead. But self-preservation dictated that Carlton Rutherford should use a method which could appear to any investigating authorities as an accident.

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He did not have to look far to find it. Details that he knew of his quarry's personal habits—his smoking, his drinking, his addiction to a variety of pills—they all pointed in the same direction.

Bartlett Mears would die in a fire at his home.

It was hard for Carlton Rutherford—or anyone else—to avoid knowing his victim's tall Victorian Hampstead house, so frequently was it featured in colour supplements and television profiles of its owner.

Bartlett Mears took the image of the impractical artist to extremes and was nationally known to live in a state of paper-strewn chaos. Coupling this fact with his heavy drinking and smoking—not to mention his reliance on sleeping pills—what was more likely than that a casually discarded cigarette butt should ignite a pile of papers in his house and cause a life-ending conflagration . . . ?

Carlton Rutherford began surveillance of the murder scene, and soon discovered that Bartlett Mears never walked anywhere. If he was going out, a taxi would arrive to take him to his destination; and on his sodden return a late-evening taxi would pour him out onto his doorstep. Then he would presumably take a few more drinks to anaesthetise himself further before falling into bed and—usually—remembering to turn out the light of his first-floor bedroom.

Obviously the fire would have to take place at night. At that time its victim's stupor and the lack of witnesses would give the conflagration a chance to take a good hold before emergency services could be summoned. But a little planning was required to ensure that a really good blaze was quickly achieved.

One day, when Bartlett Mears had been taxied away for a long lunch (all his lunches were long ones), his nemesis—Carlton Rutherford—slipped through the side gate of the house and examined the dustbins in the passage.

He quickly found what he wanted. In common with many other writers, Bartlett Mears was a member of a whole raft of literary organisations like the Society of Authors, PEN, and the Writers' Guild. Also in common with many other writers, Bartlett Mears immediately consigned the literature of these organisations—*The Author, Pen International, The Writers' Newsletter*—unopened and unread into his dustbin. Carlton Rutherford did not have to search long to find a sheaf of solid envelopes all printed with his quarry's name and address.

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Once he had secured these, and bought vodka, cigarettes, and matches, his preparations were complete. It was just a matter of waiting for the right moment to put his plan into action.

The television gave him his cue. One Tuesday he was watching the end of *Newsnight* and heard the presenter say, "Tomorrow evening in *Newsnight* we'll be discussing the pros and cons of the Net Book Agreement, and amongst those giving his—no doubt trenchant—views will be the author Bartlett Mears."

It was typical that the BBC should try to enliven an extremely dull topic by bringing in Bartlett. Whatever the subject, he could always be relied on to say something outrageous—particularly at such a late hour, when his day's drinking would really have started to build up. He was bound after the programme to have a few more drinks in one of the BBC Hospitality Suites before rolling into the car that would decant him in Hampstead.

Carlton Rutherford felt almost uncannily calm the following evening as he sat in his little flat in Upper Norwood, watching *Newsnight*. Bartlett Mears behaved predictably. He was rudely dismissive of other eminent authors, gratuitously offensive to the rather pretty girl conducting the interview, and he used the word "shit" twice to ensure that the BBC switchboard would be briefly jammed by offended listeners. It was in fact the performance for which he had been booked.

Carlton Rutherford was still calm as he got into his dilapidated Austin Allegro and drove easily across London to Hampstead. As he had anticipated, his quarry had refreshed himself for a while with BBC Hospitality, and Carlton had been parked opposite the house waiting for a full hour before the chauffeur-driven car arrived.

Bartlett Mears staggered out, with no word of thanks to the driver, and fumbled with his keys for a while before managing to open the front door.

Still icy calm, Carlton Rutherford waited another full hour for Bartlett Mears's nightcaps to be consumed and for the bedroom light to be switched off.

He gave it another half-hour, then got out of the car and sauntered across to the house opposite.

He doused some of the envelopes of literary literature with vodka and slipped them through the letter box. Then, casually, he lit a cigarette, drew on it a few times to get it thoroughly going, and dropped that through.

He waited.

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At first he thought he had failed and was on the point of starting again, when he was rewarded by a reflected orange glow on the hall ceiling.

Gently, he dropped through more of the envelopes to build up a substantial bonfire.

Then, even more gently, he trickled the contents of the second vodka bottle in through the letter box, careful to restrict its flow so that it would not douse the glowing fire, but rather spread across the carpet, warm up slowly, and ignite.

He stayed on the doorstep for two more full minutes, until he could feel the heat of his blaze through the wood of the front door, then sauntered back to his Austin Allegro.

He was back in Upper Norwood, in bed and asleep, within the hour.

He slept well, and was wakened by the *Today* programme's seven o'clock news on his clock radio.

It was exactly as he had wished. The last item of the bulletin announced the death of the popular author Bartlett Mears, in a fire which had gutted his Hampstead house.

Carlton Rutherford leaped out of his lonely bed and danced a little jig of triumph, which left him flushed and breathless.

It was agony to wait till ten, when he reckoned Dashiel Loukes would have arrived in his office. Back in the sixties, when Carlton Rutherford had been one of the white hopes of the agency, Dashiel would have encouraged the author to ring him at home. But those days were long past, and the agent had moved upmarket through a good few addresses since then. His favoured espionage authors were granted his current home number, but for lesser mortals it remained firmly ex-directory.

Eventually the hands of Carlton Rutherford's clock radio moved round to ten o'clock, and he rang through to Dashiel Loukes's office.

"I'm afraid," said the dauntingly pretty assistant, "that Mr. Loukes is busy on another call."

"Well, get him off it!" snapped the author, confident of his sudden value to the agent. "Tell him it's Carlton Rutherford on the line!"

His confidence had not been misplaced. Dashiel Loukes was through to him immediately, almost fawning in his delight to have made contact with one of his most potentially lucrative authors.

"Carlton, terrific to hear you! Just about to ring you! I assume you're calling about what I think you're calling about . . . ?"

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"I would imagine so. Rather changes the situation, doesn't it?"

"That, old boy, is the understatement of the year! Wonderful thing is—there'll now be a whole rash of Bartlett Mears books commissioned, and we've stolen a march on the lot of them, because our manuscript is already finished!"

It was interesting to hear how *your* manuscript had suddenly become *our* manuscript, but Carlton Rutherford was too excited to comment. "So what's the next step?"

"The next step, old boy, is that I set up the most almighty auction that London has seen for a long time. Bartlett Mears sells in the States too, and he's translated everywhere. We are talking about a really big international book here. It's going to be *the* title at Frankfurt, no question. We are talking big, big bucks. You've really come up with the goods this time, Carlton Rutherford!"

Those were the words that all of his literary life, the author of *Neither One Thing nor the Other* had longed to hear.

Radio and television were heavy that day with reminiscences, assessments, and tributes to Bartlett Mears. Death changes many people's tunes and all of his fellow authors spoke with inordinate affection for "the old rogue."

Carlton Rutherford hugged himself as he listened. Just wait, he thought deliciously, just wait till my book comes out. That'll really set the record straight.

More details emerged about the accident which had so prematurely robbed the eminent author of his life. The general view seemed to be that, given the chaos in which Bartlett Mears had always lived, the only surprise was that an accident of that sort had not happened before.

The one shocking piece of additional information that emerged was that Bartlett had not been the only victim of the conflagration. He had not been alone in the house at the time of his death.

There had been a woman with him.

Her body had been so charred that immediate identification had not been possible.

By the end of the day, however, news bulletins carried the startling news that the other victim had been Mariana Lestrange.

Carlton Rutherford was surprised by this information, but strangely unmoved. So . . . he had murdered two people rather than one. The literary world had lost another of its stars. It was something for which he could not grieve.

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He did wonder idly what Mariana had been doing in her ex-husband's house. He favoured a theory that she had been there to sort out some financial detail left over from their marriage, which Bartlett, typically inefficient, had neglected.

The strong rumour around literary circles that the two writers had actually been found in bed together, Carlton Rutherford refused to countenance.

He was not going to admit any thought to his mind that might threaten the sunny feeling of satisfaction that so benignly reigned there.

The following Sunday, needless to say, the quality papers—and even much of the gutter press—were full of tributes, appreciations, and assessments of Bartlett Mears.

Carlton Rutherford bought all of them, and read them all with relish. Again, he was comforted by the knowledge of how his forthcoming bestseller would upturn all of these charitable assessments.

It was while he sat there in bliss that the phone rang.

Dashiel Loukes. "Sorry to bother you on a Sunday . . ."

Carlton Rutherford did not mind at all. No doubt the agent had received the first "ballpark figure" from which the forthcoming book auction would start, and was anxious to tell his author without delay.

". . . but something's come up," the agent continued, in a voice which suggested he might be the bearer of less pleasing news.

"Oh? What?" asked Carlton Rutherford, instantly alert.

"Something which I'm afraid may rather put the kibosh on our scheme, old boy."

"What!"

"Apparently Bartlett Mears wrote his own memoirs. Did you know that?"

"No, I didn't. But that needn't worry us. By the time they've been edited and got ready for publication, my book will have been out a long time and we'll have cleaned up."

"No, I'm afraid we won't."

"Why not?"

"Bartlett Mears's *Memoirs* have been all ready for publication for the last three years. His publishers can have them on the bookstalls in a couple of months if they want to."

"But how? I mean, if they're ready, why haven't they been published before?"

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"They were all set up—pre-publicity about to start—announcement in *The Bookseller* about to be made—when suddenly they had to be withdrawn."

"But why?"

"Libel risk, old boy. Most of the people in the book were either dead or unlikely to sue, but there was one who held out. They tried sending her the manuscript to read, but that only made her even more determined to sue."

"Who was it?" asked Carlton Rutherford weakly, knowing all too well the name that Dashiel Loukes was about to pronounce.

"Mariana Lestrange," the agent replied. "But, of course, now she's dead, there's nothing to stop them publishing as soon as they want. . . ."

The agent went on for a while, explaining why this news invalidated the chances for their book, but Carlton Rutherford heard no more. He felt a sudden stab of pain in his chest, then his breath seemed to be sucked painfully out of his body until, moments after, blackness descended.

He collapsed, still holding the telephone, and died on the pile of newspaper tributes to his great rival, Bartlett Mears.

The death of Carlton Rutherford did not merit any newspaper obituaries. Memories of any promise contained in *Neither One Thing nor the Other* had long been swamped by recollections of the subsequent turgid annals of Bob Grantham. There wasn't a lot to say about a novelist who hadn't published a book since the sixties.

The British edition of Bartlett Mears's *Memoirs* was published with great éclat in the autumn of 1992. It shot straight to the top of the *Sunday Times* bestsellers list, and stayed there for many weeks. The American and foreign-language editions looked set fair to repeat this success.

Part of the appeal of the book was that it was extremely scurrilous. The author made no attempt to whitewash himself, and indeed his account of his own life was infinitely more offensive than anything contained in the forgotten manuscript of Carlton Rutherford. There was lots of dirt, which was why the book proved so phenomenally popular.

The public, as they always do, loved a rogue.

Incidentally, there was no mention in Bartlett Mears's *Memoirs* of Carlton Rutherford. The famous author had been completely unaware even of the existence of his rival.●

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Too Dead for Words

by William Bankier

"Though much of William Bankier's work is lighthearted," writes Marvin Lachman in *St. James Crime and Mystery Writers*, "he just as often writes of people going through crises." In the following story, set in part in Mr. Bankier's native Canada, the crisis evolves primarily from acts of omission, an interesting twist that shows Mr. Bankier's originality and insight. ¶

The vacation nearly ended before it started. Sam Shannon made his turn too quickly into the road leading to the motel. Marie twisted inside her shoulder harness to look back at the car's path. "You drove across the oncoming lane."

Shannon said an obscene word.

"If a car had been coming the other way . . ."

"Never marry a driving instructor."

"You're a cowboy."

"How about I do a U-turn and we go back to Montreal?"

In the backseat, sixteen-year-old Chloe said, "Hooray! Do it, Dad!"

A sign announced, "The Haven. TV/Kitchens." There was a rambling shingled structure with blue doors. Beyond, a wooden pier extended into the southern tip of Lake Cayuga. Choppy waves threw spray. Shannon drove onto a gravel space and parked.

Their cabin had a second bedroom with its own back door. When she saw that, Chloe threw her bag on the bed and said, "I'm not even unpacking. Soon as you guys are asleep, I'm out of here."

"Don't even joke," Marie said. She was five foot three. For years, her boyish figure had looked cute in the tailored clothes she liked to wear. Now she was chunky, but she still had that plump, pretty face under the mass of tight black curls.

Shannon's lanky frame covered the length of one of the beds in the main room. He was wound up after the drive but by allowing his wire-framed glasses to slide to the end of his nose, he suggested he was not mad at anybody. "Relax," he told his daughter.

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"Your boyfriend won't disappear. When we get home, Marc Lachapelle will be there."

"Lash is lucky," Chloe said. "His parents don't drag him away on boring trips that spoil his summer holidays."

The refrigerator would not turn on. Shannon reported it to the office and this was how they met Garrett Weems. The handyman came in wearing a belt festooned with tools. He was probably in his thirties. His lean cheeks and square chin were outlined with a two-day beard. He stood with his hands held inches away from his body, like a gunslinger. Marie studied him.

Weems said about the refrigerator, "Been meaning to fix this sucker. It's the plug."

The job took fifteen minutes. During this time, the visitors learned that Garrett Weems was from Kentucky. He had a wife who did not much care if she ever saw him again. He had been at the Haven for six months, fixing things up in exchange for reduced rent. His cabin was number 20, the one at the end. And he did not intend to hang around the Finger Lakes district for the rest of his life.

While his wife and daughter sat on the ends of the twin beds like birds on a wire, watching Weems work, Shannon made a show of unpacking his portable typewriter and setting it up on the table by the window. He got out a stack of paper which he positioned on the left of the machine.

When the handyman was gone, leaving the refrigerator vibrating at the end of the room, Marie said, "Sam, you're not going to start working."

Chloe said, "Here we go." Eyes rolled back, she strode into the other room and slammed the door behind her.

"Just one short piece to mail off. I have to keep up. I'm not a nine-to-fiver." As a freelance publicist, Shannon earned some of his money by keeping the Montreal Canadiens on the sports pages during the off-season. He was about to type up and mail off an item for the *Gazette*. With it, he would include a personal note for Karen Toogood, the sports editor's secretary.

Karen was on his mind. It was tough, driving away for fourteen days from everything that gave him joy. He saw himself with Karen, strolling into Desjardins, finding a table, ordering lobster, drinking wine.

Shannon was still elated following last winter's miraculous sale of a feature article to *Sports Illustrated*. The coup had given him

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some prestige around the Forum. The hockey players began looking at him as more than just a flack. A couple of subsequent treatments had been rejected, but he was not quite ready to think he would never do it again.

Chloe came in and said, "Can we go down to the lake tonight and see the fireworks? Garrett says they're spectacular."

"When were you talking to Garrett?" Shannon said.

"I was out back behind the cabins. You should see the weeds back there. Garrett was cutting them with a scythe."

"The fireworks are up in the sky. We can see them from here."

"Garrett says the best view is from the end of the pier."

"Garrett, Garrett, Garrett," Marie said, smiling to herself.

They went outside after dark, but they stayed off the pier. Shannon said there were too many people out there already. It was a good display for a small community. There was recorded music, one Sousa march after another, with "The Star-Spangled Banner" reserved for the climax. Somebody was on the ball because the rockets' red glare happened right on cue.

Like many Canadians, Shannon had an American mind-set. He was more clearly attuned to the Fourth of July than anybody down here was to Dominion Day. Their politics, their culture, were in his thoughts frequently. But if somebody were to say, "So let's scrap the Maple Leaf and adopt the U.S. flag," his scream of protest would be heard from Vancouver to Newfoundland.

"Where's Chloe?" Marie was not alarmed but her tone of voice told Shannon he would have to come up with an answer.

When he met Marie Hastings sixteen years ago, he had just begun writing sports for a neighborhood paper. There was a press reception at the Forum. Shannon was excited, meeting all the players, including the legendary Ace Hastings, who was now in the front office. His daughter took a shine to the young reporter. Marie thought he was destined for better things than the NDG *Chronicle*. They began a relationship which soon became intense.

With Chloe on the way, they got married six months later. Nobody disapproved, not even big Ace with his thick slicked hair parted in the middle, and those warrior eyes. Shannon sometimes worried about Ace catching on to his cheating. But Marie was too proud to say anything about the affair. At the same time, she never let her husband forget she could use it against him.

"Do you want me to run this over to the mailbox?" she had said

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earlier, waving the large brown envelope he had sealed with the article inside, along with his personal note to the editor's secretary. "Karen must be waiting for it."

Now, looking for Chloe among the fireworks watchers, he said, "I'll cruise around and see if I can spot her."

She was not hard to find. First he saw Garrett Weems near the end of the pier. Chloe was half hidden. Weems was behind her, his arms wrapped around her. Shannon's heart began to pound. He suspected his daughter was sleeping with Marc Lachapelle. You had to be realistic; he could remember his own teen years. But Weems was a married man, and twice her age!

Moving out along the wooden platform, he took one deep breath after another. He had to remain cool. It was not just that Weems could probably clean his clock if there was a confrontation. But worse than that, if Shannon came off like a stuffy, outraged father, the humiliation would be more than he could bear.

He was helped by the fact that the fireworks display was ending. People began to applaud and cheer, Weems turned his daughter loose, and Shannon was able to approach saying, "Some show, eh?" Then he said, "Let's go, Chloe. Your mother wants to go for ice cream." He knew his grin was artificial. He saw the effect of it in the handyman's tolerant smile.

Chloe took his hand as they moved back down the pier. "Don't tell Mom who I was with, okay, Dad?"

She had put on makeup; dark lipstick, too much stuff around the eyes. He hated the way she looked. "Only if she twists my arm."

"You're used to that," his daughter said.

At seven-thirty in the morning, Shannon rapped on the bedroom door. "Let's go, Chloe! Wakey wakey!"

Marie brushed past him and opened the door. The room was empty. "Oh my God. Call the police!"

"Don't panic." He felt as if he had been slugged in the stomach. His daughter's head was always on the pillow.

"She's gone." Marie was at the dressing table. "Her makeup kit is missing. Where's her comb?"

"Her other stuff is here." There were garments scattered around the room. Chloe's suitcase was at the end of the bed.

"I'm calling the police." Marie headed for the telephone.

"They won't do anything. It's too soon." Shannon opened the back door. He looked across the area of fresh-cut weeds, past the

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backs of the cabins, all the way to number 20 at the end. "I'm going to talk to Weems."

"What for?"

"He may have seen her."

As he went outside and closed the door, he heard Marie misdial and swear and start dialing again.

He saw the handyman in the distance, bending and straightening. He headed that way. The sun had been up for hours. Even with a breeze off the lake, it was already a hot day. Shannon was sure Weems saw him coming, knew he wanted to talk. But, perversely, he began moving in the other direction.

Lengthening his stride, Shannon covered the ground. Eventually, he was near enough to call out. "Hey!" Weems turned now and waited, watching. He seemed to be assessing the older man, and giving him a low score. He was holding sticks in his hand. They turned out to be spent rockets.

"Smell," he said, extending one of the blackened fireworks. Shannon inhaled the pungent reek of burned gunpowder. "Isn't it neat? I can get high on this stuff."

"Have you seen Chloe?"

"Not since last night."

"She's not in her room. Marie's worried."

"What about you? Are you worried?"

Shannon felt more sure of himself in daylight with nobody around. "I watched you two on the pier last night."

"Feel good, watching?"

"I haven't told her mother what's going on. But I'm telling you now. She's only sixteen."

"I know. Jailbait."

"So I'm asking you again. Do you know where Chloe is?"

Weems said, "Listen, mister. Your daughter isn't in the lake. Not yet. But she's ready to get in trouble pretty soon. You think she's this little kid, you don't see what she is."

"If you know where she's gone, please tell me."

"That girl is more grown-up than you are. When you find her, and I hope it's soon, try paying attention to what she says."

Marie was in the doorway as he came walking back, shielding her eyes against the sun, "Did you find her?"

"Weems doesn't know anything." He brushed past her and went to the telephone. "What did the police say?"

"They took down the information. It takes twenty-four hours

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before they list her as a missing person."

"Like I told you." He found a number in his address book. "I'm going to call Montreal. Talk to young Lachapelle." He began dialing. "She was bored, she wanted to go home."

"With just her comb and makeup kit? All her clothes left here?"

Listening to the ringing at the other end, Shannon said, "How about she behaved impulsively. Does that sound like our Chloe?"

"She doesn't have any money."

Obviously, there was nobody at the Chomedy Street apartment where Lash and his friends crashed and where Chloe liked to hang around. Shannon put down the telephone.

"I believe she's on her way there. She could be hitchhiking. She could have saved up for bus fare."

"She may be lying dead somewhere."

"If she's lying dead somewhere," Shannon bellowed, giving his wife back her alarming statement, "then nobody can do anything." He lowered his voice. "But I don't believe it."

"We can't go back home. We have to be here in case she shows up."

"Exactly right. You stay here and hold the fort. I'll drive back to Montreal and check out Chomedy Street. Even if she's not there, maybe she called Lash. He may know something."

Shannon found himself thinking about Karen Toogood. He began to feel excited, he could not help it.

Marie was back in the outside doorway, staring at the lake. Shannon moved behind her. He could see Garrett Weems out there, bending to pick up one flat stone after the other, flinging each one sidearm so that it went skip, skip, skip, and then sank. "It's a good plan," she said quietly. "Will you drive carefully?"

Shannon cleared the border by early afternoon and began speeding up the long straight to the south shore. He stopped at Mid's A&W for a bite to eat. Back on the road, he punched in CJAD on the radio. The sports news was mostly baseball. He thought about his PR dream for the hundredth time.

There was a big Russian in the Canadiens organization, newly arrived from the Red Army, sure to make the team in September. What if Smerdlovsky could be trained, in the off-season, to hit the curve ball? He was six foot two, 220 pounds, with a face like Tom Cruise. One of the American League teams would snap him up as a Designated Hitter. Would he sell tickets? Does Yeltsin like vodka?

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Shannon eased his pressure on the accelerator. This was no time to get stopped for speeding, not with Karen waiting to go to dinner. He knew the two-sports scheme with Smerdlovsky was only a dream. But why not? If it worked, the material would be the basis for a sure-fire second sale to *Sports Illustrated.*

Rolling across Jacques Cartier Bridge with Terre des Hommes below, Shannon recalled the excitement of Expo '67. The passage of time did not bear thinking about. He drove uptown. Chomedy Street, right beside the Forum, was a risky place to be. A lot of people over there knew him. Ace Hastings might even come walking up the street. Shannon did not want a fake-friendly conversation with his father-in-law at this particular time.

He parked in the alleyway beside the old brick building. The apartment was a semi-basement. Its dusty window was beside him. There was no light inside. It was not the first time Shannon had been here. He had come down last winter after Lash telephoned to report Chloe was not well. Something she ate, was the opinion.

Shannon drove down that day with Marie's exhortation ringing in his ears. "Call the police if those bums have done anything to her." He saw it as some sort of voodoo, this reliance of his wife on the police to solve day-to-day problems. It was out of black-and-white movies. Beefy Irishmen in tight uniforms drove up in a vintage sedan, came inside, took off their caps, and accepted coffee and homemade brownies. "It'll be all right, Mrs. Mancini. Those kids won't bother you anymore."

It was not that Marie was uninformed. She knew about gang violence, drug dealing, inadequate law and order facilities strained to the limit. She simply ignored the facts of life when her personal situation was threatened. Call the police!

On that occasion over a year ago, Shannon entered the apartment and found Chloe stretched out on a ratty sofa with a coat spread over her. At the sound of his voice, she sat up and put her head in her hands. The small shoulders looked pathetic. Lash stood frowning, hands on hips. Other kids were hiding in the kitchen, stifling nervous laughter. Chloe was younger than the rest of them; her father got the impression she was an embarrassment. This bothered him as much as anything. She could excel in her age group; why was she consorting with these losers?

In the car on the way home, she became his little girl, offering mild grunts to punctuate his lecture. "You are only sixteen years old. You simply can't disappear and do what these kids do. I can't

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speak for their parents. Maybe nobody cares about them, but we care about you. When you're of age, if you want to have your own apartment, we'll see that you get it. But you're also welcome to live at home."

"Thanks for not yelling at me, Daddy."

"Did you use dope?"

"No, no, no."

"Were you drinking?"

"I had one beer." It sounded like a lie.

Shannon let go of the past. He got into the car and drove home. He decided to get Marie out of the way first. She answered the telephone at the Cayuga motel on the first ring. "The apartment on Chomedy is dark," he told her. "That doesn't mean they were not there earlier. What do you think, shall I stick around and check it again tomorrow?"

"What does Karen say about that?"

"I'll ask her when she wakes up." No response. His wife sounded as if she had been drinking, which was not like her. "Marie, I came back here to look for Chloe."

"Take your time. If she's not back by Labor Day, you can put an ad in the paper."

When Marie put down the telephone, Garrett Weems said, "Can we go back to my cabin?"

"What's wrong with here?"

"It spooks me when he calls like that."

"He won't do it again. That was the duty call. Now he's off to visit his girlfriend."

"Aren't men rotten?" Weems rolled off the bed and stepped into his shoes. "You're out of beer," he said. "Let's go to my place."

Karen Toogood was a born listener. Shannon liked her clothes, the lacey collars and cuffs, the sheer stockings and subdued, expensive shoes. He admired the way she did her job, pushing the journalists around, protecting her editor. And her physical attributes never ceased to turn him on: the healthy glow of her russet skin and the peltlike texture of her hair. He liked to run his thumb across her eyebrows, which were slightly darker than her hair.

But most of all, Shannon enjoyed talking on and on and on about whatever crossed his mind. One topic would lead to another while Karen, with his hardly noticing, said just the right few words to keep him going. Maybe she should have been a therapist.

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Tonight, however, was different. They had dined well at Le Mas des Oliviers. Now they were in Karen's apartment on the twelfth floor of a new building on Sherbrooke Street. A million city lights peppered the blackness below a broad window. Whenever he came in here, Shannon's first instinct was to press his back against the far wall.

She'd made coffee, the Courvoisier was out of the cupboard, and he was still talking. He opened up about Garrett Weems, going on about the young man's macho presence around the cabins.

Karen said, "One of the 78s my father used to play was by the Ted Weems Orchestra. It was called 'Heartaches,' and some guy actually whistled a chorus. It was hokey, but I liked it." Then she continued, settling back with her balloon glass, "Think about this, Sam. You left Marie alone with that stud on purpose. You set it up. If your wife falls into bed with him, you won't have to feel so guilty about us."

"Can we change my next appointment, Doctor? I have to go in for brain surgery."

"Marie has undoubtedly had affairs you never heard of. Adventures. She only has one life, just like the rest of us. I suspect she's been living it."

Shannon drove home to his house in NDG just after sunrise. He went to bed for the second time and slept until noon, when the ringing telephone awakened him. Good; Marie was trying to catch him off base, but he was here!

It was not Marie. It was a homicide detective calling from the town of Ithaca in upstate New York. There had been a shooting. A man named Garrett Weems was dead. Marie Shannon was under arrest.

Shannon had to jump into the car and go. He took only the time to call Karen. She was out, so he left a message on her machine. Then he hit the road, barreling south towards Rouse's Point and the border.

How could this have happened? It must have been self-defense. Marie did not own a gun, but Weems probably did. They argued about something. It was maddening not to know. The police officer on the telephone had sounded like a stubborn, bureaucratic oaf. There was no getting any details from him. Shannon just had to come there as fast as he could.

What were they arguing about, his wife and Garrett Weems? It

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must have been Chloe. Marie had stumbled on some clue as to her disappearance. The handyman was implicated. The gun was his, Marie got hold of it and shot him.

He did the drive without stopping for food. He was razor-sharp and hungry when he arrived in Ithaca. The building where they were holding Marie was not impressive. Shannon went inside, identified himself, asked to see his wife.

An officer led him down a corridor and into a small room with a lot of filing cabinets in it. He was left alone. A few minutes later, she was sent in and the door closed behind her.

It was as if he was seeing his wife for the first time, or with new eyes. Her face was changed in some subtle way. Her eyes were slightly narrowed, the corners of her mouth drawn down. He imagined a cold wind blowing against her, and only her. It was her personal cold wind.

They embraced for a moment, then stepped apart. He kept one of her hands in both of his. The fingers were lifeless. "What happened?"

"I was in his cabin. We went along the back to number 20."

"But what happened? Marie, we both know I've been cheating for years." Her eyes were fixed on a corner of the room. "Were you with Weems? Did you go to bed with him?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Now let's get beyond that. Did you kill him?"

"Yes."

"How? What did you do it with?"

"The gun he kept in his top drawer. On the other side from Chloe's makeup kit."

"Then he killed her. Have you told that to the police?"

Marie took her hand away. There was a desk in the center of the room and two chairs. She sat on one of them. "He didn't kill her. She ran away."

"How do you know?"

"He said so."

"But you killed him."

Marie Hastings Shannon described the events of those hours. They had gone to his cabin because he wanted beer. He drank from the tin, spilling some on his bare chest. She liked the smell, the taste of it. They made love.

Later, the telephone rang. The office needed him to do something. Weems got dressed and left the cabin.

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Alone, Marie did the natural thing. She opened drawers and searched them. She did not have far to look. In the top drawer of a painted pine dresser, she saw an automatic pistol. She hefted it; the weight surprised her. Then she saw Chloe's makeup kit tucked between rolled socks. She took it and the gun and went to sit on the edge of the bed. When Garrett Weems returned, he found his visitor positioned with the makeup kit beside her and his gun, held with both her hands, aimed at his chest.

"What's it like," Marie said, her voice flat, "to have the sixteen-year-old daughter and then her mother, one after the other?"

"She came on to me."

"Where is she? What did you do with her?"

"Nothing. She left while I was asleep. I figured she'd gone back to your cabin."

He was taking off his shirt, kicking out of his shoes, getting ready to come back to her. Marie's mind boiled as it was carried back to high school; boys who didn't know, boys who didn't care.

"I don't believe you, Garrett. I think the police had better know about this."

"Don't do it, Marie."

"I'd better tell them."

"Making trouble for me? What for? I told you, your daughter took off. She must have hit the road." He had on only his white briefs now. He moved casually towards the bed, those capable hands framing his hips.

His intention to go ahead and do with her whatever he wanted irritated Marie. She was not so much outraged or frightened as she was annoyed. It was time for the sleazy bully to lose. She raised the gun and it just seemed to go off. She remembered thinking, "That was easy."

Now she told her husband, who was hiding away from her against the filing cabinets, "That one shot hit him in the chest. He must have died instantly."

"Have you spoken to a lawyer?"

"They sent one to talk to me. He's young. I don't know if he's any good."

"And . . . ?"

"He thinks I have a case. A lot depends on what turns out with Chloe. Garrett could have lied about her running away. He could have killed her after all."

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Shannon stayed in town for a couple of days, visiting his wife, bringing her things she needed. He spoke to the lawyer, could not decide what to think about him. Marie's fate did, indeed, depend on how the Chloe situation developed.

He checked in with Karen Toogood and was told he had to return immediately to Montreal. A feature he had submitted was soon to be published, but it would need a major rewrite. It was a satirical piece dealing with the faulty roof on the Olympic Stadium. Marie understood and wished him luck. "Go for it," was her advice, delivered with an Ace Hastings inflection.

On the drive back, Shannon tossed it around in his mind. He was not sure how to feel. There were two possibilities. If Garrett Weems had killed Chloe, if they dragged the lake, say, and her body was recovered, then Marie's trial would almost surely produce a positive verdict. She could be back on the street in fairly short order. But this scenario called for Chloe to be dead and gone.

On the other hand, if his daughter showed up alive, just another routine teenage runaway, that would be good news. But Marie might then be put away for fifteen years to life.

Which set of circumstances did he want? Shannon spoke his answer aloud: "Neither of the above."

There were the towers on the flat horizon. There was the dark, sleeping lion which was the profile of Mount Royal. Airline pilots must feel like this, Shannon thought, shuttling between one city and another.

He crossed the river, took his place in the traffic grind, decided to swing past Chomedy Street one more time. Again, the apartment was dark. He did not believe Chloe was dead. That feeling would not take hold. She could have fled in any direction. Shannon recalled his own teen years. He had been a home boy, devoid of any inclination to run away. He could not imagine abandoning his comfortable bed, his meals, his safety.

Then he remembered that his parents left him alone. His world was small, but he went where he wanted to go. His summers were two months of freedom, running with his buddies, taking what each day happened to deliver. There were no programmed weeks featuring imprisonment in the backseat of a car and boredom in a succession of motel rooms.

Shannon drove out to NDG and parked beside the house. He let himself in and froze inside the vestibule after he closed the front

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door. The place was not empty. It seemed to breathe.

He walked quietly down the hall and looked inside Chloe's room. The narrow bed was unoccupied. He moved to the master bedroom. The door was almost closed. He eased it open, went inside, looked down at the big bed. There was Chloe's tousled head on one pillow, Marc Lachapelle's on the other. Their breathing was peaceful.

Shannon reached over and snapped on the bedside lamp. The splash of light prompted groans and shifts. Chloe pulled the covers over her head. He could hear her muffled voice: "Lord, Lord . . ."

"I guess I came home too early," Shannon said. He left the room and went to sit in his big chair in the living room. He was staring into the dead fireplace when Lash presented himself minutes later, fully dressed.

"I'm sorry, sir."

The boy looked reedy in his stovepipe jeans and black satin shirt, as if a gust of wind would separate him and scatter his limbs across the room. Although his heart was still pounding, Shannon found himself saying, "It isn't the end of the world."

Lash left the house. Shannon continued to take one breath after another, feeling his knees through the fabric of his trousers. Eventually, Chloe drifted into the room and sat on a corner of the sofa. The jeans, the striped blouse, were wrinkled, her hair was in disarray, her feet were bare. Still, she looked gorgeous. The young, Shannon thought, have such an unfair advantage.

"Sorry, Dad."

"Is that all?"

"I thought you and Mom would go on to Niagara Falls, like you planned."

"She thought you were dead."

"Didn't you talk to Garrett?"

"He wouldn't tell me anything. Eventually he told your mother you'd been with him."

"I know that must seem nasty to you. But it was no big deal. And everything worked out fine. That night, after he was asleep, I was lying there awake. It was just getting light, around four o'clock. I heard a car warming up. I ran out and spoke to the man. He was putting his luggage in the trunk. I asked for a lift. He said okay, but I had to hurry, he was on his way. So I ran back. Garrett was awake. He gave me twenty bucks and I put my shoes on and ran. There was no time to take anything. He drove me as far

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as Plattsburgh. From there, I hitched a ride to Montreal."

"You left us dangling, Chloe. I never believed you were dead, but Marie did."

"I know, Dad. I've had time to think about it." She lifted her head and peered through a curtain of hair, looking him in the eye. "You guys don't understand how mad I was. You drag me around like I'm a little kid. But even so, running away was wrong. I'll never do it again."

Shannon said, "You don't know what's happened." He went on to explain about the shooting at the lake, and Marie's arrest on a charge of murder. "I've been visiting her. She's devastated."

"She killed Garrett because of me?"

"That was part of the reason." Shannon looked around his living room. It was as if all the familiar things had been lifted by a stranger and set down again in slightly different positions. Nothing would ever be the same. "Your mother was confused," he said.

Father and daughter drove once more to the hills of upstate New York. Shannon liked this trip better. It was good not to be alone. But when he glanced at his reflection in the rearview mirror, his face was grim. He could think of nothing to say. Garrett Weems was too dead for words.

Chloe told him, "It'll be all right." She was sitting as if she had always occupied the front seat.

"It's a shambles."

"If her lawyer is no good, we can get a better one. This isn't murder, it's manslaughter. There are mitigating circumstances. She could get a reduced sentence. And you only serve half of that, then you're out on parole. Mom will have lots more life."

"Where do you get all this?"

"I watch Court TV."

Thinking about the concept of lots more life, Shannon said, "A man is dead. I can't forget Weems."

"She couldn't help herself."

"It isn't just Marie. You got involved first. And I went away and left her alone with him." The car was entering Ithaca. "We're all responsible."

"So now we stick together," Chloe said cheerfully. "Calamities like this make stronger families."

It sounded to Shannon like a child's perspective. But he had nothing better to run with. ●

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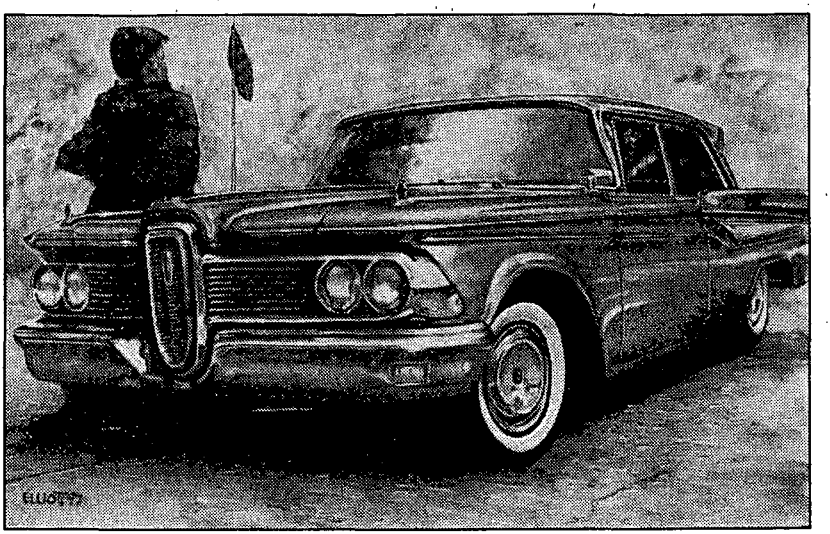

WAKE UP LITTLE SUZIE

by Ed Gorman

1.

"Murder," she said.

"Murder?"

"Uh-huh," she said. Then: "Edsel."

Usually Pamela Forrest doesn't have any trouble at all speaking in complete sentences. But at the moment her lovely mouth was filled with a piece of donut, a fact she was demurely trying to hide behind a napkin, and so of necessity she spoke in a kind of code.

"Somebody got murdered in an Edsel?" I said.

She said: "Trunk."

Murder. Edsel. Trunk.

It was starting to make sense.

"That's why the judge got me over here?" I said.

She held up one slender, elegant finger to indicate that I should indulge her a few more moments, and then she made a big effort of

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swallowing the rest of her donut-bite in a single gulp.

I suppose I should tell you right here that I'm in love with Pamela Forrest and plan to marry her someday. I also suppose I should tell you that Pamela Forrest is in love with Stew McGinley and plans to marry *him* someday. Cross-purposes, I think the term is.

"What Edsel are we talking about?" I said.

She said, "Stan, the Ford dealer?"

"Stan Winwood. Right."

"He had his unveiling yesterday."

He sure did. He even served beer at it, as I can testify, having swilled down maybe a half-dozen of the big paper cups myself. I had a good excuse: It's not every day that Ford Motor Company introduces a car that's going to revolutionize the auto industry as the Edsel is going to. All across the country, at more than three hundred dealerships yesterday afternoon, Americans got their first look at the Edsel.

"So Stan came to work—" I said.

"—and then he noticed this yellow Edsel he'd left out near the service garage overnight—"

"—and when he walked up to it and saw the trunk—"

"—there was blood all over it. So he opened the trunk and looked inside and—"

Now it all made *perfect* sense, what those sumptuous lovely lips had been telling me: Murder. Edsel. Trunk.

"He opened up the trunk and there was a body in it," I said.

"Exactly. And that's what the judge wants to talk to you about. And you're already—" She gave me a flash of her heartbreaking profile as she looked up at the wall clock. "—twelve minutes late."

"How's her mood?"

Pamela, never Pam, smiled at me. In her buff-blue, two-piece summer suit and her soft blond hair pulled back into a loose chignon, she looked city-smart as all hell, like Grace Kelly in *To Catch a Thief.*

"How's her mood, McCain? When somebody's late? Are you kidding?"

Since I was already twelve minutes in arrears, I decided to gamble it all and be *thirteen* minutes late.

"There's a Tony Curtis double-feature on at the drive-in tonight," I said. "I know how much you like Tony Curtis."

She sighed. "You never give up, do you?"

"You don't, either. With good ole Stew."

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"We had our time, McCain, and it just didn't work out for us."

"We had three weeks, and then you went right back to mooning over Stew."

"That isn't a very flattering word, mooning."

"You know what I mean."

"I'm in love with Stew. I can't help it."

"And I'm in love with you, and *I* can't help it."

"Poor you, and poor me. But you'd better get in there, McCain. She's really on the warpath."

"'Tony Curtis," I said, and held up two fingers. "Two Tony Curtises, in fact."

Just then her intercom crackled to life and Judge Eleanor Whitney said, "Is he out there bothering you again, Pamela?"

She winked at me. "He never bothers me, Your Honor. In fact, in a kind of pathetic way, he's sort of cute."

"Tell him to get his butt in here."

"Yessir, Your Honor."

When the judge clicked off, I said, "Thanks for saying I'm cute."

She smiled and said, "I said 'sort of cute,' McCain. It's not exactly the same thing."

The last time Judge Eleanor Whitney was in a good mood, at least as far as anybody can recall, was sometime in June, 1906.

In her first sixty-one years, she's buried three husbands, built herself four mansions, bought and paid for several local elections, and even managed to install a governor who, unfortunately, had to be recalled after it was proved he'd engineered a stock swindle in another state.

Other than that, she's a pretty typical Midwestern widow who flies her own Beechcraft-Bonanza, plays the occasional nine holes with President Eisenhower, and is a world-class fox hunter.

This morning she wore a white blouse that was frillier than she usually seemed to care for, a handsome and well-fitted blue skirt, and a scowl that would give men on death row the chills. For all her power, and occasional malice, she's actually a pretty woman, with a pert little face, a very well-kept and very tidy little body, and the wiles of a seductress when the circumstance requires.

One other thing about her: She shoots rubber bands. Uses thumb and finger as a gun to launch them.

One sailed past me just as I stepped into her chambers and even before I could quite seat myself in a leather chair across from her desk, she was already loading up another round.

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She came away from the window, seated herself in her magisterial high-backed leather chair, and said, "You know who he's arrested?"

"You mean Chief Sykes?"

"Of course I mean Chief Sykes. Who else would I mean? And by the way, don't you think it's time you stopped pestering Pamela?"

"In reverse order: a) I'm not pestering Pamela. She's actually in love with me but she just doesn't know it yet. And b) How would I know who Chief Sykes arrested?"

"Pentecost."

"Lou Pentecost?"

"Lou Pentecost. Charged him with first-degree murder."

"You're kidding."

"Of course I'm not kidding, McCain. I never kid about Sykes. You should know that by now."

"But why would he charge Lou Pentecost?"

"Because the victim is Suzie Taylor. Lou'd been seen around with her and Sykes says that he was seen leaving the car lot around dawn this morning."

"Seen by whom?"

She had an impish and seductive smile. "Old Charlie Burton."

"Now you *are* kidding."

"That's what the esteemed chief of police told me on the phone this morning."

"But Old Charlie Burton—"

"—hasn't been sober since nineteen thirty-one. So as a witness, he's—"

"—totally unreliable."

"Exactly. That's why I want you to go to work on this, McCain. That poor man sitting in jail didn't kill her. I'm sure of it."

But she wasn't thinking of "that poor man." She was thinking of the Sykes clan.

During his four-year tenure as police chief, Cliff Sykes has indicted five people for murder. Every one of them was later proved innocent. I know, because Judge Whitney hired me as an investigator to check out the cases myself. I'm a pretty good investigator, actually. In addition to my law degree, I've been taking criminology courses over at the state university, and during the summer I usually spend a couple of weeks auditing courses at the state police academy.

So why is Judge Whitney so obsessed with humiliating Chief Sykes? She's old money, he's new money. Her people came out

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here from Connecticut 160 years ago and settled this part of the frontier. They brought some formidable cash reserves with them. It was the Whitneys who built this town. And they ran it, too, for well over a hundred years, right up till the end of WWII. The Sykes family, prairie people as suspicious of "fancy folk" as they were of bathing, struck one of those wartime gold mines. Their very modest construction company got the nod from the federal government to build roads and airstrips out here. By the early 1950s, the Sykes had even more money than the Whitneys. And they spent it just as the Whitneys had spent it—they bought themselves a mayor and a town council, and as soon as that council was installed, its first act was to appoint the eldest Sykes boy, Cliff, chief of police. In desperation, obviously hoping to frustrate the Sykeses in the only way she could, Eleanor Whitney got the governor to appoint her the local judge, and fixed it so that Cliff Sykes always had to ask her for his search warrants, writs of habeas corpus and so forth, a situation she relished and Cliff Sykes loathed.

Money hadn't changed the Sykes family any, Judge Whitney's friends liked to say. They were still the same mean, stupid, dishonest, and uncouth people they'd always been. But when Cliff Sykes, Sr., built the tire factory and became the biggest employer in Black River Falls, Iowa, pop. 20,457, the Sykes family took on the mantle of the respectable and the revered. Even if they did still smell a little bad when you stood downwind of them.

"You know, Judge, one of these days, Cliff Sykes, Jr., is going to arrest the right man just to spite you."

"I probably won't live long enough to see it."

"And maybe someday my law practice will be able to support me and I won't have to run all over town making enemies."

"That's part of a lawyer's job, making enemies. Or didn't they teach you that in law school?"

I smiled. "That isn't exactly how they phrased it. I think they mentioned something about pursuing the truth."

"Well, in this town making enemies and pursuing the truth are very often the same thing, McCain. Now get the hell out of here. Court starts in fifteen minutes."

I stood up. "You mind if I tell you you look nice this morning? Maybe it's because there aren't any rattlesnakes around."

That's one other thing the judge does, she keeps a dozen rattlesnakes in glass cages in her mansion. That's why I'm always a little nervous when I'm out there.

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"Why, McCain, you're young enough to be my son." But my words, and they'd been sincere, had put a dazzle in those green eyes that was nice to behold. "I sure do appreciate the compliment. Now git."

And with that, she fired off another rubber band, missing my head by two inches.

I held up two fingers as I passed by Pamela's desk in the outer office. "Two Tony Curtis pictures, and they're having Hula-Hoop contests on top of the concession stand between movies."

"Hula Hoops," she said, and shook her head. "This whole town has gone crazy. Did I tell you I saw Sister Mary Rosamund out on the convent lawn practicing with a Hula Hoop? I just wish people could be a little more dignified."

I smiled. "Like Liberace." I felt sorry for him, the way people made fun of him, but he sure was corny.

"Exactly," she said, being a long-time fan of the man's. "Exactly like Liberace."

2.

Cliff Sykes, Jr., sat with his size 14 DD cowboy boots up on his desk, his khaki uniform morning-fresh, and his gray eyes filled with scorn as he said, "This time, she's wrong."

"She just wants me to talk to him."

"For what?" Sykes said.

"He needs a lawyer, doesn't he?"

"He didn't ask for you," Sykes said.

"He still needs a lawyer."

"He killed her."

"Maybe you're right this time, Cliff."

"I sure don't know why you'd want to work for somebody like her."

"She isn't so bad."

"We took that blood oath that time, the four of us in that Indian gang we started up, remember?"

"I remember." We'd been eight or nine years old, four scruffy small-town kids who'd decided to become Indians after seeing the fifteen-part serial *War Drums of the Mohawks* with Roy "Crash" Corrigan. Pete Himes went first, cutting his wrist with a pocketknife, but he teared up so bad the rest of us decided to forgo the pleasure of slashing our wrists, the way Crash had in the movie, and just sort of rubbed our wrists together.

"We said we'd always defend each other."

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"Yes, we did, Cliff."

"Seems to me like you're defendin' her instead of me."

"I'm not defending either of you, Cliff. I just want to see the man and see if he'd like me as a lawyer."

"Daddy's gonna be real pissed if you get involved in this case. So's Luke."

"Your brother Luke?"

"Uh-huh."

"Why would Luke be pissed? He's the fire marshal."

"Yeah, but she kept Daddy'n him out of the country club. Personally, I don't give two raccoon turds if I ever get in that club or not. But you know how Luke's wife is. Real highfalutin' and all. She still drives to Cedar Rapids twice a week to take those damned rhumba lessons. Now she's got Luke taking them." He frowned, all the little nicks and cuts on his face standing out in bloody relief against his pasty skin. Near as I can figure, Cliff Sykes, Jr., shaves himself with a butcher knife. The tiny pieces of toilet paper absorbing the blood do not make him any prettier, either.

"I won't need more than ten minutes."

"He killed her. And I almost got a confession out of him, too, if that damned Ralph hadn't stopped me."

"Ralph your deputy stopped you?"

"Yeah, I had Lou Pentecost down on the floor, and I was pretendin' like I was gonna strangle him to death, you know, and Ralph starts screamin' like a woman and stoppin' me. All I was doin' was trying to scare Pentecost a little. Figured if he thought he was ready to die, he might just confess. And I could sense it about to happen, too. So I gnawed on Ralph real good, made him hand over every one of those books he's been readin'. I took them right out to the incinerator and burned the damned things."

"What books were those?"

"Those law enforcement books he bought. Filled with all this crap Earl Warren's always talkin' about, the rights of the accused and all that baloney. I mean, if you can't do a little stranglin', how you ever gonna get a confession?"

"I couldn't agree more, Cliff. I mean, I think the Founding Fathers clearly had 'stranglin'' in mind when they wrote the Bill of Rights."

"That darned Ralph. He even got my other deputies readin' those books of his."

"Good thing you burned them when you did, Cliff. Otherwise there wouldn't have been any stranglin' goin' on over here at all."

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"I'm givin' you ten minutes with him, Cody, then I'm gonna kick your ass out of here. Understood?"

"Understood."

He opened the middle drawer of his desk and took out a key ring and said, "He did it, Cody. He did it, all right. No matter what Judge Whitney says."

"I want a simple answer, yes or no, and I want it to be the truth. You understand, Lou?"

He nodded miserably.

"Did you kill her?"

He looked right straight at me, and in a strong clear voice said, "I don't think so."

"You don't think so? What the hell does that mean?"

"You know how I get sometimes."

"Lou, I *don't* know how you get sometimes. I barely know you."

"But I barfed all over the podium that night I was giving the speech at the Jaycees. You were there."

"Oh God, that's right."

"All that potato salad I'd been eating."

"I get the picture, Lou."

"I just can't hold my liquor."

"And you were drinking last night?"

"Lots."

"Alone?"

"Sometimes. I mean, I was in and out of several taverns. I was pretty messed up."

"Why?"

"Because Suzie didn't want to see me anymore."

"Lou, I hate to remind you of this, but you're a married man."

His head dipped, and he pawed at his face with a shaky white hand.

The jail was six cells in a large square room with only two windows. Even the sunlight had a dank and grainy feel to it up here. The other cells were empty. Lou sat on the edge of a cot that looked as if it would collapse every time he moved. He smelled of sleep and urine and sweat. On the floor in front of him was a tray with the remnants of breakfast: two pieces of toast, untouched; an open container of orange drink; a cup of coffee he'd finished, and two pancakes he'd apparently done some nibbling on. Idly, almost unconsciously, he kept pushing the tray away with his right foot, then nudging it back to him with his left, as if it was all some kind

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of crisis he couldn't resolve. In high school he was a state champion gymnast, so he could move foot and toe with graceful ease.

He said, "I know I'm a married man."

"With two kids."

"I just needed to sow some wild oats. That's all it was. I got married when I was eighteen, right after high school, and went to work over at the paint plant, and I never got a chance to run around."

"Neither did your wife, Lou."

"It's different with men."

"Yeah? You sure about that?" Then I said, "Your wife grew up down the street from me, Lou. I guess I still feel a little protective about her. She's a nice woman. But I don't need to give you a sermon."

"I've got a sermon coming, believe me."

"Old Charlie Burton says he saw you over at the Ford lot this morning."

"That's where she said to meet her."

"Suzie?"

"Uh-huh."

"So you remember talking to her?"

He thought a long moment. "I guess it was around three. I woke up in the city park behind the bandstand after the celebration. Must've passed out there. Then I found a phone booth and called her. She sounded—funny."

"Funny?"

"Scared or something."

"She say why?"

"No. She just said she needed to get out of town and this was the last time I'd ever get a chance to see her." He shook his head again. "I guess I figured it was because she was going to miss me and all; her wanting to meet me in back of the Windwood lot—but that wasn't why at all."

"It wasn't?"

"She wanted me to give her all the money I had. She didn't give a damn about me at all."

"You seem pretty clear about all this."

"Yeah. I mean, I was sober there for a while. Maybe an hour after I woke up. But then I found my car and got in the trunk. I usually keep a pint of Jim Beam there. So I drank that and got good and drunk again."

"Then what?"

"Then I don't know. I mean, it's all pretty hazy."

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"You remember meeting her?"

"I don't think so."

"You got any recollection of a yellow Edsel?"

"You see those damned things? Nobody's gonna pay good money for one of those pieces of crap."

"Right now, I just want to know about *one* Edsel, Lou. A yellow one near the back of Winwood's lot."

"That's where they found her, right? In that yellow one, I mean? In the trunk?"

"Right."

He looked at me and then he did it, just sat there and started bawling.

I'm not good around bawlers of either sex. I don't think it's unmanly, I don't think it's even especially embarrassing to watch. It's just that it makes me feel so damned helpless.

"Lou," I'd say every half-minute or so. "Lou."

He just kept on crying.

"Lou."

And more tears.

"Lou, look, I've only got a few minutes before Sykes kicks me out. I've got to ask you another question."

He looked up at me with big silver tears hanging from his eyes like stalactites.

"You gonna ask me if I killed her?"

"No. I'm going to ask you if you want me to be your lawyer."

"I'm just a working guy, Cody. I don't have any money."

"Right now I'm not worried about money. Right now all I care about is if you want me as your lawyer."

He started sniffling, bringing his tears to an end. "Well, sure, Cody, I mean, if you *want* to be my lawyer."

"You could use a lawyer about now."

"She used to have a crush on you, you know that?"

"Suzie?"

"No. Ida. My wife."

"Oh."

"She would've been a lot better off marryin' you than me," he said.

And then he started crying again.

3.

I listened to a little Chuck Berry as I tooled my way over to Stan Winwood Ford and Lincoln. And now Edsel.

I was in my cherry red 1951 Ford ragtop, the one all the

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teenagers crowd around whenever I pull into the A & W of a warm evening. I take better care of my ragtop than I do myself.

You could see the debris of Edsel Day, yesterday, September 4, 1958, all over Stan's car lot. Pennants still snapped crisply in the breeze. Several dozen Dixie cups still needed to be raked up from the concrete. And the picnic tables and the folding chairs and the podium used by the local dignitaries (if that's not a contradiction in terms) still needed to be taken back to the rental place. The feeling was that of melancholy around Stan Winwood's Ford and Lincoln this morning.

I knew Stan well enough to walk straight back to his office. I was just about to knock on the closed door when I heard him shout into the phone, "Either that damned disk jockey of yours is fired, or I'll never advertise on your station again, Pete!" And then a phone was slammed.

I knocked.

"Come in!" Stan shouted.

Actually, he already had a visitor, Bob Penny, the owner of Penny Paints, where my spanking-new client Lou Pentecost was employed. At least, until he'd been charged with murder.

"Oh, hi, Cody," Stan said, not sounding all that thrilled to see me.

"I'm a little busy right now, Code," Stan said. He's a chunky man who wears bright golf clothes all year round. He's bald and round-faced, and he'd probably be asked to play Santa Claus in the town pageant if he wasn't so crabby most of the time. He also always calls me "Code," as if that single extra syllable is just too much work for him to say.

"Hi, Cody," Bob Penny said. Bob, on the other hand, is long and lean, with graying hair and the hard face of an evangelist who takes his work very seriously. He was dressed, as always, with a certain primness—dark suit, white shirt, dark tie, as if all dressed up for an emergency funeral he might have to go to. "You've heard about Lou Pentecost?"

"That's why I'm here," I said.

I guess I sort of invited myself in. Sat myself down next to Penny across the desk from Winwood.

"To hell with Lou Pentecost," Stan said. "How about my Edsels. That damned disk jockey at KSTB has been making jokes about them all morning long."

As had a good deal of the country, at least according to the *Today* show this morning. (I don't care much for Dave Garroway, the host, but I do like his chimp.) Ford's self-declared "Edsel Day"

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had been met with an unexpected amount of scorn and derision. One Ford dealer alone, somewhere in California, had spent $15,000 on fireworks last night. Automobile critics said the Edsel had not enough horsepower and too many gimmicks—push-button gears and a tachometer, among other features. But what bothered most people was the grille, which several men had whispered looked just like the female sexual organ. And it sort of did.

Apparently, like many of his fellow Edsel dealers across the nation, Stan Winwood had awakened this morning, read his newspaper, and learned that despite all the hoopla, the Ford Motor Company had created a car that a lot of people saw as something of a joke.

A knock.

"Mr. Winwood," said a very nervous mechanic peeking in through the door, "one of the Edsels we sold yesterday?"

"Un-huh?"

"Well, guy's been having some trouble with it and he wants to talk to you."

"What kinda trouble?"

"Said it rattles a lot."

"Rattles?" Stan Winwood said, vaulting out of his chair as if he'd been shot from a cannon. "Rattles? It can't rattle! It's only one day old!"

But in fact, the man from *Consumer Reports* Garroway had interviewed this morning had the same complaint. Test-driving had shown inexplicable rattling and very bad steering.

"I'll talk to the sonofabitch all right!" Stan Winwood said, sounding as if he was going to beat the guy up for criticizing the car Ford had promised would revolutionize the industry.

Then he was gone and Bob Penny said, "Lou Pentecost is one of my best workers. I just wish he wouldn't have gotten involved with Suzie. He has such a fine wife."

"You're assuming he did it, then?"

He shrugged. "Right now I'm not sure what to think, I guess. You saw him?"

"For a few minutes. I'm going to represent him."

He smiled. "Judge Whitney wouldn't have anything to do with this, would she?" He didn't wait for my answer. "It's almost pathetic, isn't it?"

"What is?"

"Watching a woman of her intelligence and caliber going after a redneck like Sykes." Like much of the town's ruling class, he'd

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long ago sided with Judge Whitney. The thing was, he couldn't afford to cross Cliff Sykes, Sr. A year ago, when Penny's paint factory had burned to the ground after an electrical fire, he'd been forced to turn to Sykes, Sr., for a low-interest quick loan. Sykes had given him the money in exchange for his tacit support in town matters. "But I suppose even Sykes can be right once in a while."

I stood up. "Guess I'll go out and look over the Edsel where they found her."

"I'll walk out with you," Penny said.

Since his car was near the yellow Edsel, he walked over there with me.

Sykes had had sense enough to cordon the car off, but as all the footprints around the vehicle showed, he hadn't been smart enough to take any casts of the prints nor, from what I could see when I inspected the trunk, had he even dusted for fingerprints. He probably thought these ideas were too "new-fangled." All a good lawman needed to do was to drag some poor wretch back to the jailhouse and do hisself a little bit of "stranglin'." Life was a pretty simple business for people like Sykes.

"Well, I need to get back to the plant," Penny said. "Give Lou my best."

I spent twenty minutes going over the car. The trunk was bloody inside, and smelled pretty bad. She'd been stabbed several times.

I made notes in my little notebook, the way they'd taught us to in crime class, and then I snapped a few pictures of the trunk open and the trunk closed. After that I started walking up and down the alley in back of the yellow Edsel. I had no idea what I was looking for. But it was a sure thing that Cliff Sykes, Jr., hadn't done any kind of scientific investigation at all, not when he had stranglin' at hand.

I found footprints with a strange V pattern. The soles led from the cordoned-off area to the alley, where they started to disappear in the tire tracks of this morning's traffic.

Not until I followed them back to the yellow Edsel did I notice the barely microscopic flecks of red on the concrete around the car.

I got down on my hands and knees, like the human equivalent of a hunting dog, and followed the flecks back to the alley. The flecks were inside the outline of the shoes.

When I finally looked up, I saw a little girl standing next to her mommy. Mommy was talking to one of the Edsel salesmen. Little Girl was watching me, no doubt wondering why I was down on all fours.

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As she stood there, in all her five years or so, a Hula Hoop went round and round on her little hips.

"You look funny, mister," she said.

I wanted to tell her that she looked funny, too, but I'm much too gallant ever to insult a lady.

4.

About the time I reached Penny's Paints, the factory workers were taking their lunch break. Hot autumn lent the air a sweet perfume. I went out back where Penny had built picnic tables for his people. He paid good wages and was about as decent to his employees as employers ever got.

I spent a half-hour asking questions of people talking around bites of Spam sandwiches, hot dogs, thermoses of soup, and lots of Hostess cupcakes. There were a couple of radios going, both playing the rock and roll station: *"Yackety-Yak"* by the Coasters had been voted the town's favorite hit of the day according to the disk jockey. Over beneath an elm tree two young women taught another young woman the intricacies of the Cha-lypso, which Dick Clark was pushing these days on *American Bandstand.*

Then I finally heard something useful.

"Davey," the man said, biting into an apple carefully with what appeared to be a brand-new set of dentures.

"Davey?"

"Davey Hovis."

"I guess I don't know who he is."

"Works here." He smiled. "Part-time, anyway. Spends most of his time working on his hair. Got him one of those ducktails. He went out with her a lot."

"I thought she was seeing Lou Pentecost."

He winked. "She was a busy gal."

Five minutes later, I said, "Davey Hovis?"

"Yeah, what's it to ya?"

My informant was right. I found Davey in the back of the plant, in the area where winter coats were hung and galoshes stored. A small, square, faded mirror was hung behind the door.

"I'd like to talk to you."

"A lot of people would like to talk to me. Especially chicks."

He was a cutie, all right, kind of a pudgy version of Elvis, the upturned shirt collar, the long, wide sideburns, the Lucky Strikes riding in the rolled-up sleeve, the calculated sneer.

"I'm told you went out with Suzie."

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For the first time, his comb stopped raking his wavy blond hair into a duck's ass. He looked at me with great and practiced insolence. "I go out with a lot of women."

"I'm also told she liked Lou Pentecost better than she did you, and that you didn't like that at all." I hadn't been told that at all but I thought it might prompt an interesting reaction.

He went back to combing his hair. "He killed her, didn't he?"

"That's what Sykes thinks, anyway."

"Oh, he killed her, all right."

"What makes you so sure?"

He didn't say anything for a time. Just combed his locks. "October fifth."

"What about it?"

"That's the day we were gonna get married."

"She told him?"

"Damn right she told him. And that's why he killed her. She prolly even told him about the song."

"The song?"

"Yeah. She thought I sounded a lot like Elvis."

"She did, huh?"

"Yeah, and she wanted me to sing at our wedding. 'Love Me Tender.' It was gonna be, like, my debut. I was even thinkin' of puttin' a little band together. You never know, I might pick up a record contract or something."

By now, I'd duly noted his dry eyes. If he was upset about his bride-to-be having been killed, he was keeping it to himself.

Leather creaked. As he moved away from the mirror—a guy can only comb his hair so many hours a day—his brand-new tan cowboy boots made new-shoe noise.

When I looked down at them, I saw the red flecks instantly, all along the sides of the boots. The same red flecks I'd seen in the parking lot by the Edsel.

"You've got something on your boots," I said.

He looked down and said a nasty word. "Damned cleaning compound the janitors use on the floor at night. Sticks to your shoes all the next day."

The news didn't make me happy. With so many people tracking the compound all over town, its usefulness as any kind of clue was worthless.

"You book a hall for your wedding?"

He shrugged. "Didn't need one."

"Oh?"

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"Just gonna have the JP marry us. Small ceremony. Just havin' my old lady and stepfather come over from Davenport."

I was wondering if he was just making up the wedding to give his competition, Lou Pentecost, a motive for murdering Suzie.

"You talk to the JP about it?"

"I sure did. He was all set up for the fifth."

"That'd be JP Bauman?"

"Sure would." He smiled. "You Lou's lawyer?"

"Yeah."

The smile became a sneer. "You got your hands full, man. He killed her for sure."

Suzie had lived in a three-story stucco box that had probably been an upscale apartment house back when President Harding was taking office. Now it didn't look so hot. Maybe it was the rusting Kaiser that was up on blocks in the front yard.

I found the door with the MANAGER sign on it and knocked. A man wearing an undershirt and suspenders, with a massive belly, gray work pants, bare feet, and a terrible-smelling cigar opened the door of apartment 2.

In the background, I could hear Jack Bailey welcoming everybody to *Queen for a Day*.

"Yeah?"

I told him who I was, and why I was here.

"She was a good-time gal, if you know what I mean. My wife said she was a hussy."

"A hussy. I see."

"She really means whore, but hussy sounds better."

"I see."

"We was always wonderin' where she got her money from."

"Money?"

"You should see her apartment."

"I'd like to."

A few minutes later, he turned the key to apartment 6 on the second floor, pushed the door inward, and then led us inside.

"Need to open these damned windows," he said. "Closed 'em after the rain the other night and forgot about the damned things."

Everything in the place was new and expensive, including the 21-inch Zenith console TV and the two closets full of rather fashionable clothes. She had had taste, our Suzie. And money.

"And you don't have any idea where she got her money?"

"Well, she worked at the paint factory but that sure as hell

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didn't buy her all this stuff," he said.

We were profaners, to be sure. Here was the apartment of a murdered woman and we were paying her death no honor at all. Indeed, we were dishonoring her memory by making the worst sort of speculations.

"She saw a lot of men?"

"I thought of that, too," he said. "You know, a pross."

"Pross?"

"Prostitute."

"Oh."

"We used to call them 'prosses' over in the South Seas during the war."

"I see."

"But anyway, I sat down at the kitchen table one night and figured it out with a pad and pencil."

"Figured what out?"

"How many men she'd have to have over to make this kind of money. You know how many men she'd have to average a night? I mean, that console there alone cost six hundred dollars."

"How many men?"

"Six, seven a night. At ten dollars a throw."

"That's a lot of men."

"Wife says she couldn't have done it."

"Oh?"

"Female parts would've given her trouble, all those men like that on a regular basis."

"Yeah, probably."

"And we sure as hell would've noticed that many guys tramping up and down the stairs at night."

"Did you notice any men?"

"Just Lou and Davey. You can have Davey. Wife didn't approve of Lou, him bein' married and all, but he was a lot nicer guy than that Davey creep. I hear Sykes arrested Lou."

"Yeah."

"Sykes doesn't know his butt from a hole in the ground."

I had my usual late lunch of cheeseburger, fries, and Cherry Coke over at the Rexall. The radio played the new Jerry Lee Lewis song while I read an article in the paper about Debbie Reynolds and Eddie Fisher and how they had one of the few Hollywood marriages that would really last.

Then I just sat there and smoked a couple of Pall Malls over my

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cup of coffee and thought about the case.

It was time to talk to Judge Whitney. I'm not bad at gathering all the information but Judge Whitney is particularly good at figuring out what it all means.

"Tony Curtis said he'd really like to see you tonight," I said to Pamela as I walked into the judge's office.

"Yeah, well, Marjorie Main said she'd really like to see *you*," Pamela said.

Marjorie Main being, of course, the grumpy "Ma" of Ma and Pa Kettle, and not exactly the kind of female that sets innocent young hearts like mine aflutter.

"She in?"

"Uh-huh."

"How's her mood?"

"Well, she gave three defendants the maximum sentence this morning."

"Any death penalties?"

"No, and I think she was disappointed."

I don't think there are any words that fill Judge Eleanor Whitney with such warmth—at least when she's in one of her moods—as "hang by the neck until dead."

I knocked the way a supplicant would knock on the Pope's door and waited to hear her familiar bark. She barked; I went inside.

"You won't guess who's had three charges of public drunkenness dropped against him," the judge said as I sat down.

"Sure I can guess. Old Charlie Burton."

"Exactly. Sykes is rewarding him for testifying against Lou Pentecost." Then: "So what did you find out?"

I told her everything and when I was finished she said, "The apartment. All the new furniture. That's the part that puzzles me."

And with that, she launched a rubber band past my head.

"Could she have inherited it?" the judge asked.

"I did some checking. From what I could find, she hadn't come into any money that either the bank or her attorney knew of."

"Her attorney?"

"Hascomb. He handled her divorce two years ago."

"Where's the husband?"

"Germany. In the Army."

"So she just mysteriously started spending money. It wasn't credit?"

"Checked that, too. The merchants I talked to said she always paid cash."

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"She couldn't have been—"

I shook my head. "Thought of that, too. In fact, the guy who manages her apartment said that he worked it out on paper and she couldn't possibly have seen that many guys."

She was about to say something else but then a quick nervous series of knocks sounded on the door and without waiting to be barked inside, Pamela put her lovely face between edge of door and frame and said, "Cliff Sykes, Jr., is on the phone, Cody, and he's screaming that he wants to talk to you."

The judge rolled her eyes.

I stood up and walked around on the side of Judge Whitney's desk and picked up the receiver.

"Hello?" I said.

"You sonofabitch."

"And a good day to you, Chief."

"You bastard."

"I didn't know you cared, Chief."

"You helped him escape, didn't you?"

"What the hell're you talking about?"

My sudden change in tone caused the judge to sit up straight in her chair and start watching my face closely.

"He jumped the guard who brought him his lunch and then somehow managed to wiggle through one of the barred windows."

We both had the same thought at the same time.

"He was a gymnast in high school," Sykes said. "Remember?"

"I didn't have a damned thing to do with him escaping, Sykes, and you know it. This is just about the worst thing an innocent man could've done."

"Yeah, well, you'll have a hell of a time proving he's innocent now."

And with that, Sykes slammed down the phone.

5.

I haven't been on many manhunts in my life but the few times I've gone along, I've noticed the almost joyous air of the participants. It's like playing cowboys and Indians for real.

By the time I got over there, a posse had formed in front of the police station. Men with hunting dogs and shotguns were gathered around pickups and cars, ready to go.

I noticed that the posse included Penny from the paint factory, who didn't seem to be carrying any sort of weapon at all; and Davey Hovis, who was hefting a double-barreled shotgun.

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Chief Sykes even had on his Colt .45, worn gunfighter style, low to the left of his imposing gut.

He even used the word "reckon" a couple of times.

"I reckon you boys know the kind've killer we're up against here, so I don't reckon I have to tell you to show first and ask questions later. You know what I'm saying here."

"I reckon I do, Quick-Draw," I wanted to say, but I figured Sykes would find some reason for jailing me if I did.

The men then piled into their vehicles and took off for various parts of the countryside. Lou Pentecost had grown up here. He'd know a good number of hiding places.

Sykes came over and said, "You may get cheated out of your trial fee, counselor."

"Just remember he's probably unarmed."

"He wasn't unarmed when he killed Suzie."

"*If* he killed Suzie."

"If he didn't kill Suzie, he wouldn't have no reason to run."

I smiled haplessly at him and said, "I reckon you're right."

But he didn't get the joke. Which didn't surprise me a whole lot.

Then he was gone, too.

I was just walking back to my office when I saw Ida Pentecost, Lou's wife. She was pushing a stroller along the street.

"I appreciate what you're tryin' to do for us," she said. Ida wasn't a beauty but she had a nice face and vivid brown intelligent eyes. "I just wish he hadn't escaped."

"Me, too," I said.

I bent over and reached down to tickle her little baby on the chin. Which is just when she decided to spit up.

"Oh, here, use this washcloth I keep in my purse," she said.

I took that moment to swear off the little ones for the rest of my life. You try to tickle them, and they upchuck all over you.

As I dried my finger, she said, "Everything was going so good, too. He was finally going to get the promotion Mr. Penny promised him before the fire."

"Promotion?"

"Yeah. Lou figured out a way to mix the paint faster and so Mr. Penny was going to put him in charge of production. But then he went and got in all the financial trouble, and then he had the fire on top of it."

I handed her back her washcloth. "You know a man named Davey Hovis?"

"Sure. He was her boyfriend. Suzie's, I mean. Till she and Lou

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started— Well, you know what they started doin'."

"Hovis ever bother you or Lou?"

"Lou must've told you, huh?"

"Told me?"

"About Hovis pouring gasoline on the floor out in our garage. I happened to be taking out the garbage that night and I saw him. Then I made Lou tell me what was goin' on. He told me about Suzie, then. Told me he thought it was all over." The vivid brown eyes burned with painful recollection. "I kept waitin' for him to tell me it was all a joke, you know, about him and Suzie and all. But it wasn't a joke, was it?"

"No, I guess it wasn't."

"And he kept right on seein' her."

"I'm sorry, Ida."

"But I don't want him to be killed. That's what I'm afraid of, with Sykes and all."

"If you hear from him, let me know right away, all right?"

"I sure will, Cody. I sure will."

She started pushing the stroller down the walk again.

"So you're starting to favor this Hovis character, huh?" Judge Whitney said.

I'd told her about my conversation with Ida Pentecost.

"I sure am."

"So am I."

We were in her office, the beautiful Pamela gone home for the day. The judge had broken out the brandy, which we were drinking from fancy glass snifters.

"What was his motive?" she said.

"Jealousy."

"And if he killed Suzie and blamed Lou—"

"—he'd get double the satisfaction."

"You may be onto something, McCain, you know that?"

Her phone rang. She picked up and said, "Eleanor Whitney." There was just a smidge of arrogance in the way she said it. Sort of like, "God speaking, may I help you?"

She listened.

Didn't say a single word.

Then hung up.

"Trouble, McCain. Sykes and his posse've got Lou Pentecost cornered in the old livery stable, and they say that he won't give himself up."

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I was up and at the door in moments. "I'll give you a call soon as I know anything."

The ragtop got me there in five minutes. There were two crowds, the first being the onlookers, who ringed the posse; the second being the posse that ringed the old two-story barnlike livery stable. These days, the sole blacksmith worked only part-time, and by appointment.

I grabbed Sykes's arm. "I'm going in there."

"He'll shoot you."

"I'd bet he's unarmed."

"He says he's armed."

"Saying and being are two different things. He was drunk last night and can't remember things too well. He's scared."

Sykes said, "It's your life."

I worked my way through the posse.

Penny put a hand on my shoulder and said, "Tell him to give himself up. Tell him I'll pay his legal bills. He's a valuable employee."

"I'll tell him that, Mr. Penny. I appreciate it."

Davey Hovis didn't look happy about Mr. Penny's words at all. He just hugged his shotgun, obviously eager for a chance to use it.

The whole thing took twenty minutes and, frankly, most of it was pretty boring, so I'll spare you the details.

The upshot was that once I got inside the livery stable, I stood in the center of the floor and looked up at the shadowy loft where Lou was hiding.

I called his name out a few hundred times and finally he squeaked, "Get out of here, Cody."

"I want to help you."

"You can't help me, Cody. Sykes has already got me convicted and ready for the noose."

"If you didn't do it, Cody, I'll be able to prove that. I really will."

"You got a lot more faith in our justice system than I do."

And that's pretty much how it went until I said, "Your little one upchucked on my hand this afternoon."

"My little one?" he said from the shadows above me, where he was hiding.

And I could tell I'd said the right thing, the way warmth and pride replaced the fear and anger in his voice.

"You should've seen her," I said.

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Then I told him about this sweet little frilly pink dress she was wearing.

"I can't seem to remember that one," he said.

"Well, she was wearing it."

"Ida look good, too?"

"Ida looked great."

"I'm scared, Cody."

"I know you are, Lou."

"I want to give myself up but I can't quite seem to do it."

"I'm coming up."

"Please don't do that, Cody."

"I'm walking over to that ladder and I'm coming up and the only way you can stop me is to shoot me and I don't think you'd do that, Lou. I really don't think you would."

Behind me, I could hear the crowd murmur. It doesn't hurt your ego any to have your fellow townspeople thinking that you're one brave guy.

Lou didn't have a gun, at least I was pretty sure he didn't, so I was going up, and then I'd bring him down, and I'd probably get my picture in the paper and everything.

To the crowd, this was just like watching a movie.

Well, as you might expect, I went up the ladder and Lou didn't have a gun and after letting him cry a little, I took him gently by the arm and led him over to the ladder and watched him climb down.

I don't know if I exactly figured on applause from the crowd but at least I expected *some* recognition of how brave it seemed I'd been.

But as I climbed down, I realized that everything had grown very still. When I got to the floor, I saw, in fact, that the entire crowd, including Sykes and his posse, had gone somewhere else.

What the hell was going on?

I grabbed Lou by the arm and started yanking him along behind me.

The crowd had its back to us and was ringing Sykes's own squad car.

And in the backseat of that car, his hands bound together with handcuffs, was Mr. Penny from the paint factory.

"What the hell's going on?" Lou said. "How come Sykes is arresting Mr. Penny?"

And then I saw her, Judge Whitney, standing off to the side of the squad car, a tiny smirk on her face while Sykes glowered at her.

Lou had it right: What was going on here?

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❖ ❖ ❖

In the morning, after parking my ragtop in an empty courthouse slot, I walked up the steps to Judge Whitney's office and went inside.

Pamela, looking ever lovely, said, "She tell you yet?"

"Tell me what?"

"How she figured out Penny was the murderer."

I nodded.

"Yeah, she did."

"God, how?"

"She just kept thinking about all the new furniture and stuff that Suzie kept buying, wondering where Suzie could ever get that kind of money. So the judge looked at all the people involved, and decided that Mr. Penny was the only one who had a lot of money. Then she tried to figure out why Penny would *give* Suzie all that money?"

"And then," said Judge Whitney, coming out of her chambers, "I realized that there was only one reason he'd be so generous—she had something on him. Turns out, she worked late many nights, and she saw Penny set fire to his own building. He was broke and the only way he could get any money was insurance. So she blackmailed him, and he finally couldn't tolerate it anymore, and he killed her, hoping that Sykes would think Lou Pentecost did it."

"But didn't the fire inspector know that the fire was arson?" Pamela said.

"Lord, Pamela, you're forgetting the last name of the fire inspector," Judge Whitney said.

"That's right," Pamela laughed. "Mike Sykes—Cliff's cousin."

"And just as dumb as everybody else in the Sykes clan," the judge said smugly. Then she smiled: "That makes five, McCain."

"Five?" Pamela said.

"Five times she's humiliated Sykes," I said.

The judge said, "Hold my calls, Pamela. I want to sit in my office and gloat for a while."

Then she was gone.

"Those Tony Curtis movies are still on at the drive-in tonight," I said.

"Oh, McCain, aren't you ever going to give up?"

"Not in the foreseeable future."

She made a clucking sound. "Poor, poor McCain."

Then she started doing some furious typing, just as if I wasn't there at all. ●

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NEXT ISSUE...

Headaches and Bad Dreams
BY LAWRENCE BLOCK

Disposing of Mrs. Cronk
BY PETER LOVESEY

How Things Are
BY BARBARA OWENS

Night Train to Babylon
BY RAY BRADBURY

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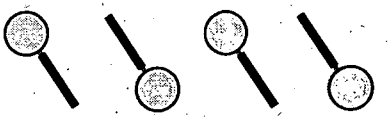

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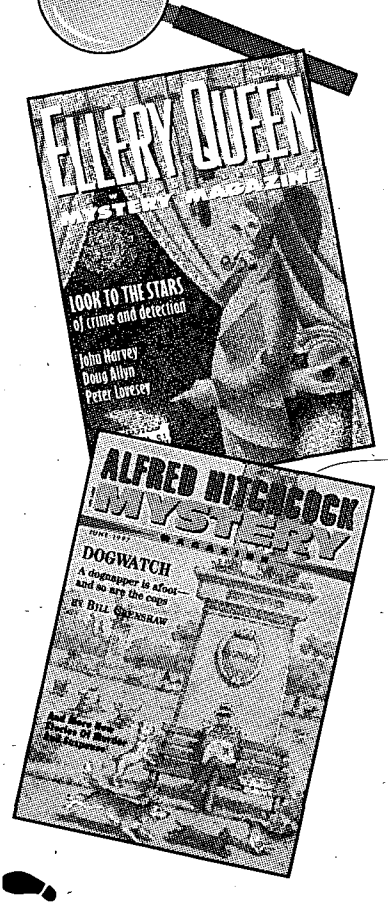

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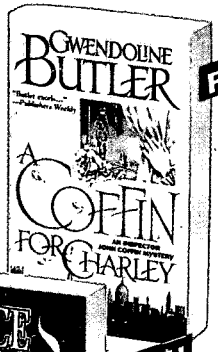

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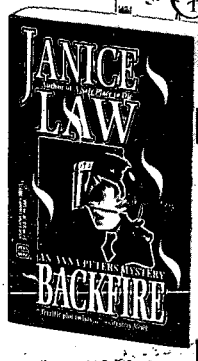

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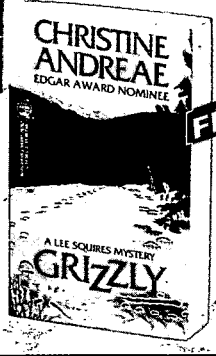

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